

The Berkshire Eagle

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Add solar to local shopping list

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WASHINGTON

On a lazy day in August under a sunny sky, it's easy to love The Berkshires. With its physical beauty, temperate climate, outdoor activities and cultural offerings, what's not to like? In National Geographic's rankings of the world's top travel destinations, published last December, we tied for 7.

A traditional summertime Mecca, the county has seen a boost to our creative economy from newer year-round facilities like Mass MoCA and the Colonial and Mahaiwe Theatres. But of course, there are clouds in that bright Berkshire sky. We suffer from the usual social ills like crime and drugs, and from the Great Recession. But two of the darkest clouds are the lack of broadband connections in many of our towns, and our dependence on fossil fuels for energy.

High-speed Internet access is becoming increasingly necessary for commerce, education, health care and entertainment. Western Massachusetts has one of the highest concentrations anywhere of self-employed people working out of their homes. Yet too many of us can't get broadband, because the telecommunications giants have skimmed off the more densely populated parts of the county but declined to serve more rural areas which do not meet their corporate criteria for "homes per mile."

Fortunately, the solution to the broadband problem is at hand. The Massachusetts Broadband Institute recently was awarded a \$45 million grant in federal stimulus funds, matched by \$26 million from the state. This will allow MBI to construct a fiber-optic "middle-mile" network connecting 123 towns in Western and North-Central Massachusetts, and bringing broadband to town halls, police departments, schools and libraries.

By itself MBI's network will not bring broadband into your home or business. For that you need a "last-mile" connection. A new organization called WiredWest is working with representatives appointed by 47 Western Massachusetts towns (I'm one of them) to create a community based and controlled last-mile network. This will be a local solution to a local need.

Nothing would seem further from local control than our energy supply. Renewables can help reduce our energy dependency, but even a place as "green" as the Berkshires has resisted wind turbines and biomass plants. That leaves solar as our best bet for replacing fossil fuels and creating a green economy to go along with our creative one and our soon-to-be wired one.

Readers of The Eagle have seen reports about solar installations in the county, like the "Berkshire Bundle," a group of solar electric (photovoltaic) projects put together by EOS Ventures, a local solar and wind development company. With financing from Berkshire Bank, EOS installed solar panels it owns at seven commercial and institutional facilities, and sells the power they generate to those organizations under a long-term contract called a "power purchase agreement" (PPA), saving them money while going green.

PPAs can also be used to supply power to homeowners from panels installed on their rooftops. A family can go solar without having to buy a system and just pay as they go for the green power they use. In an August 2 article, the Eagle reported that residential PPAs are being offered here by SunRun, a company described as “a national home solar finance company.” But the article did not mention that the company is based in California and that financing for the solar systems they will install here comes from the giant California utility Pacific Gas & Electric. So when you sign a PPA with SunRun and mail them a check every month, instead of sending energy dollars to the Middle East, you’ll be sending energy dollars to the Far West.

Financial incentives available from the state for installing solar will be leaving Massachusetts too. If any form of energy should be locally based, it is home solar, which is generated and used on-site. The revenues from PPAs should remain in our local economy to create jobs here. After all, this is an area important to the history of the electricity industry.

In 1886 William Stanley invented technology which made modern electric power distribution possible. His Pittsfield-based company was acquired in 1903 by General Electric, which had a major presence in the city for nearly a century.

On the eve of Pittsfield’s 250th anniversary in 2011, and the 125th of Stanley’s invention, will we now forego the economic benefits of the rapidly-growing solar electric industry? I say “No!” I am launching a Berkshire-based company to offer solar PPAs to homeowners here. Not only will our revenues and jobs remain in the local economy, we will bring in additional revenue from panels we install elsewhere in Massachusetts and surrounding states. But for us to succeed will require support from the community, local business and economic development organizations, private investors, area banks, and you.

Here In the Berkshires we believe that local is good. The “locavore” movement, eating food produced by local growers and suppliers, has strong roots here. We even have our own local currency, BerkShares. The Berkshire Chamber of Commerce is conducting a campaign to “Buy in the Berkshires” and keep our money in the local economy. Solar power generated and sold locally should be on our Berkshire shopping list.

Steve Nelson is CEO of Solar Electric Service Corporation.