



Balancing Clean Energy Needs

In 2020, the Virginia General Assembly passed the Virginia Clean Economy Act (VCEA) with the aim of zero carbon emissions in the state by 2050. However, since the measure was passed four years ago, demands for power are now projected to more than double in the next 15 years, driven largely by the continued increase in data centers locating to the state.

The VCEA calls for the adoption of renewable energy sources, such as solar, to meet its goals. Unfortunately, an attempt to balance our clean energy needs with the need to protect prime agriculture and forest lands—and localities' authority—has created dissension among stakeholders.

To help build consensus between various interests, CBF urges legislators to adopt a regional planning model, as well as state technical assistance where required, to create more structure and balance as we move forward on our clean energy goals. This process would provide localities the information and opportunity to better shape comprehensive energy planning. Regional plans would be built around achieving targets for energy production and energy efficiency that would meet our VCEA goals, using approaches that are workable for each region of the Commonwealth. Regional plans would inform our state plan so Virginia's statewide targets are tied to local implementation.

A site suitability workgroup would be created to provide guidance on potential means to achieve energy targets and modeled targets for each region.

A state site suitability interagency task force would be created to provide advisory services to localities. This group would provide a clear, objective summary of a project to localities and ensure multiple considerations are factored into recommendations, such as cost-effectiveness, impacts to natural, cultural, and historic resources, and impacts to communities of color, among others.

CBF believes this approach to solar siting can balance localities' vision for their communities with our statewide clean-energy goals.

For more information, contact
Jay Ford • 757-971-2600 • jford@cbf.org
Patrick Fanning • 304-952-7496 • pfanning@cbf.org

Each part of the Commonwealth contains unique local concerns, economic drivers, and natural, cultural, and historic resources. As Virginia moves to meet our energy needs and renewable energy targets, it is essential that all of Virginia feels bought in and engaged in the process. CBF's proposal creates a framework to provide localities a chance to help shape comprehensive energy planning for their regions.

This proposal is a roadmap to increase VCEA buy-in from localities around the Commonwealth by providing them much needed technical assistance and an opportunity to weigh in directly on how the infrastructure needed to achieve VCEA targets can best be integrated into their regions.

The proposed model would provide technical assistance positions and funding to the planning district commissions to aid in the development of regional energy plans, liaise with state agencies, present on state task force recommendations at local government hearings, and help apply for state and federal clean energy funding opportunities.

Additionally, the proposal includes a process to increase the accuracy of information and technical expertise available to decision makers at the local level. The importance of maintaining local authority was identified as a primary concern by most stakeholders. However, there was universal consensus that the local permitting process could benefit from additional technical expertise. The proposed legislation meets the need for more informed decision making while also providing solar developers with a more objective process in local hearings.

We urge legislators to move forward with this framework for helping localities make sound decisions around solar siting, so we can all work together to meet our VCEA goals.



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