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Fall 2020

Increasing Renewable and Clean Energy in Illinois

The fifth anniversary of Pope Francis' groundbreaking encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, was celebrated in June. It is in this spirit of celebration that we note certain aspects of evolving clean energy legislation expected to be debated this spring in the Illinois Legislature.

The measure will most likely integrate elements from the previously-introduced Clean Energy Jobs Act and principles for a clean and renewable economy announced this summer by Gov. J.B. Pritzker. The governor's standards focus on increasing utility accountability and transparency, creating new clean energy jobs, reducing harmful emissions, and maintaining low energy costs for consumers and industrial users.

This new legislation will build on the success of the 2016 Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA), which sought to increase state investment in renewable energies such as solar and wind and promote efficiencies in electric energy. FEJA also called for access to clean energy and the jobs that come with this industry, along with the creation of the Illinois Solar for All program for financially struggling communities.

The efforts of FEJA are now coming to fruition, as Illinois consumers participating in electric energy efficiency programs are seeing decreased utility bills.¹ Solar and wind energy usage have increased, as have jobs related to this expansion. Illinois as of 2018 hosted more than 123,000 clean energy jobs – an increase of 4% from the previous year.²

As Pope Francis states in *Laudato Si'*, “climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all.” (23) It is with concern for this common good that we offer the following considerations for the expected legislation – measures that we believe could help Illinois progress on the path to increased renewable and clean energy, accompanied by significant reductions in pollution, carbon emissions and other environmental blights on our common home, the Earth.

We note that any efforts to increase clean energy and rein in climate change should hold fast to the litmus test for any new policy: Does it respect the life and dignity of the human person and consider the impact on marginalized populations, such as the poor and vulnerable? Pope Francis underscores the importance of these values when he states the following in *Laudato Si'*:

¹ <https://www.comed.com/News/Pages/NewsReleases/2019-04-09.aspx>

² <https://www.cleanjobsmidwest.com/state/illinois>

“We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay.” (165)

“There is an urgent need to develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy.” (26)

Expansion of Illinois Solar for All

We encourage the General Assembly to expand and increase funding for the Illinois Solar for All program. This initiative offers incentives to poor communities and nonprofit organizations — such as the Catholic Church — to install solar panels on their buildings.

However, program participation among nonprofits and religious organizations has been low because of a lack of funding. As a state, we could all better live out the wisdom of *Laudato Si'* with increased funding for this key program.

Expanding Gas Energy Efficiency Programs

Any clean energy legislation should seek to replicate the success low-income communities and nonprofits – like Catholic parishes – have experienced with electric efficiencies with gas energy efficiency programs. Yet funding is insufficient, so new provisions should expand access to and boost monies for gas efficiencies, allowing for the transition to ecologically-aware gas boilers and water heaters.

We stress, however, that any increase in renewable or clean energy should not be funded by vendors or utilities that would burden families or nonprofits in poor communities.

Reinvestment in Communities

We recall that Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* keeps top of mind the concept of “integral ecology,” in which nothing on the Earth exists in isolation:

“Today, the analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others and to the environment.” (141)

“We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” (139)

As public policy moves increasingly toward renewable energy sources, this interconnection must be considered, especially any negative effects on communities hosting fossil fuel power plants, coal mines, or nuclear plants. A new clean energy proposal should call for reinvestment in such communities in the form of workforce training programs, incentives for new business creation, and

the revitalization of land stripped for fossil fuels. Our brothers and sisters in rural and agricultural areas also must not be forgotten.

Increasing Job Opportunities in the Clean Energy Industry

New legislation most likely will set out specific requirements on increasing and expanding access to jobs in this new industry. Although we take no position on such requisites, we recognize the dignity of work and encourage the development of employment options, especially for marginalized workers.

We conclude by encouraging the Illinois General Assembly to craft renewable and efficient energy policies in an atmosphere of comity that respects the human dignity of all and aids the poor and vulnerable.

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The Catholic Conference of Illinois was created in 1969 to serve as the public policy voice of the Illinois bishops and the six dioceses of the state: Belleville, Chicago, Joliet, Peoria, Rockford and Springfield-in-Illinois.