Chapter 57

Tackling Climate Change through Educational Awareness: A Case Study on Georgia House Resolution 689

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing renewable energy systems as an educational tool for students creates not only a source for clean energy; it also provides a tangible way to increase their knowledge about science. Education is an essential element in the response to climate change. Students play an important role in addressing the issues of our planet, of which climate change is paramount. This case study examines why Georgia House Resolution 689 (HR689) did not pass in its original legislative form. Further, the study addresses how Georgia Power’s opposition was key to getting the resolution pulled from the Debate Calendar resulting in a privilege resolution substitute. Suggesting that in regions of the Deep South passing any declaration which expressly supports alternative energy initiatives that increase awareness of climate change will be met with stiff opposition.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

In 1973, the Georgia General Assembly adopted the Georgia Territorial Electric Service Act, establishing assigned territories for Georgia utilities, in which they have the responsibility/privilege to serve all residential, small business and existing large commercial and industrial customer. For most new large commercial and industrial customers (over 900 kW of connected load – a load comparable to a large supermarket), the Act allows for competition among all the utilities in the State to serve these loads. However, once a utility serves a location/meter; it has exclusive rights to be the “electrical service provider” to that meter forever1.

Basically, this law divides the state into zones where Georgia Power, 52 cities and 42 cooperatives have established a regulated monopoly. Southern Company2 owns and operates Georgia Power and is

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the largest of the utilities that serves more than 2.25 million customers in all but four of Georgia’s 159 counties (Georgia Power, 2014). The Territorial Act means no one else can sell power, except to a utility, even someone owning a few solar panels. Anyone can own panels to produce electricity for their own use, and utilities will even buy the excess. And leasing solar panels is legal, but not having someone else own the panels according, to the law (Jones, 2011). James Marlow, vice chair of the Georgia Solar Energy Association stated:

In Georgia, we have about a dozen state policies preventing creation of solar energy…One of those is the Territorial Act…If you’re looking at a school, one of the common ways [of setting up solar panels] is using a power purchase agreement or PPA; A PPA allows a school system, for example, to obtain the panels for no cost from a solar installation company which could finance the panels. (Cardinale, 2010)

Further, because of Georgia’s Territorial Act, schools and school districts with solar panels can only sell their energy to Georgia Power or other established electric utility. This means they cannot enter into a Power Purchase Agreement with a solar installation company and therefore may have difficulty affording the panels. A Ceres (2014) study placed Georgia Power’s parent, Southern Company, ranked thirty-first out of thirty-two companies for its renewable energy sales in 2012, when about half of one percent of its retail sales were derived from renewables. In response to President Obama’s roll-out of rules limiting greenhouse gas emissions by new power plants. Southern CEO Tom Fanning stated in an interview with the Atlanta Journal Constitution that he is trying to secure “clean, safe, reliable, affordable” energy. In contrast, he said:

The Environmental Protection Agency is only worried about the clean part -- with the result that its rules drive the supply of power down and the price up. If the recession had not suppressed the demand for power… that demand might have outrun supply in the near future. Because EPA was requiring us to economically shut down a significant portion of the coal fleet, if the economy had kept growing, we would have had very tight reserve margins in the 2015-2016 time frame. (Lavelle and Donald, 2014)

Twenty-nine states require utilities to use or procure renewable energy that would account for a certain percentage of their electricity sales or a certain amount of generating capacity according to a set schedule³. States in the Deep South⁴ are controlled by Republican super-majorities and have no State goals or mandates that require utilities to provide energy from renewable energy sources. There is a stark line of division between most Democrats and Republicans when it comes to energy policy. Democrats generally support renewable energy and Republicans do sometimes, but to a lesser extent. Conservative advocacy groups including the American Legislative Exchange Council, Americans for Prosperity, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and the John Locke Foundation -- organizations that have considerable influence in Republican controlled legislatures disagree with how technologies should be deployed, subsidized or regulated. These groups believe that mandating the use of a certain type of energy in the private sector are, quite, frankly government intrusion, not energy freedom. Manipulating the free market in this way only hurts consumers and taxpayers in Georgia and other States.

Southern’s interest in energy policy is not surprising, since more than 80 percent of the 200 million megawatt hours of electricity its plants generate annually is fired by fossil fuels — the main source of greenhouse gases (Lavelle and Donald, 2014). The two biggest greenhouse gas emitting coal plants in the nation are in Georgia, run by Southern subsidiary Georgia Power: Plant Bowen near Cartersville