

## FREE PRESS EDITORIAL: Power Up Michigan

### Put plans in action now for meeting the state's future electricity needs

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Michigan needs an energy boost. That's energy as in electricity. The state needs more of it and needs it soon. To the greatest extent possible, it should be homegrown.

Despite the flagging economy, most studies show that Michigan's demand for electricity will continue to grow, albeit at a modest rate. The latest study from a Public Service Commission work group projects an annual increase in demand of 1.2%. Combined with the age of some of Michigan's power plants and the logistical problems of moving power into and through peninsulas, there is a solid case for new electricity sources to assure that Michigan can keep the lights on, keep its residents comfortably cool on hot days, and have a stable supply for whatever new businesses can be attracted here.



The PSC study group is expected to report next month with recommendations to Gov. Jennifer Granholm on how best to meet Michigan's electricity needs over the next decade. She has asked that it include a recommendation for renewable energy.

The Legislature will then pick up the ball next year, and lawmakers appear geared up to act. The interest in energy policy showed up during the election campaign, with 87 candidates for the Legislature signing Environment Michigan's 25x25 pledge -- supporting 25% renewable energy by 2025. Thirty-three of those candidates won their races.

In another show of interest, 7,000 Consumers Energy customers have volunteered to pay a slight premium to support the company's purchases of power from renewable sources.

The appetite for alternative energy sources does not take away the need for one or two new power plants. But the future increasingly lies with solutions that minimize the use of fossil fuels, even abundant ones such as coal. Here's how the state can lay the groundwork:

- **Renewables:** Many states have set a minimum for alternative sources of energy, generally called a

renewable portfolio standard. A PSC study group has found that a 7% renewable portfolio standard for Michigan is readily achievable -- which means the Legislature needs to aim higher. Other states have a 10% threshold. Possibilities include wood chips, methane from landfills and farms, wind turbines and, eventually, solar power, as the price comes down.

- **Conservation:** Good policies could slow the projected increase in demand by as much as half, according to another PSC study group. Lawmakers need to return to conservation-minded building codes, upgrade state facilities and help municipalities do the same. The federal government also could help by setting high efficiency standards for new appliances.
- **Interconnections, net metering:** Imagine a system that feeds power from homes and businesses into the grid, as well as delivering it. The next big change may not be a new fuel source as much as a way to coordinate interconnections among many sources. Then small solar and wind systems can help meet demand beyond their own needs; factories would have an incentive to generate power off some of their other processes.

That would make the electricity grid more like the Internet, broadly distributed and interactive -- and vulnerable to chaos without good protocols. Figuring out how to make this work, known as net metering, will be a huge advantage to any state that pulls it off.

In harsh economic times, it's easy to fall for the line about asking the last person leaving Michigan to turn off the lights. By taking leadership in strong energy policies, Michigan might actually turn on more lights.

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