


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Solar power initiative reworked

Darby optimistic on committee hearing

By Kiah Collier

Posted April 13, 2011 at 6:56 p.m., updated April 13, 2011 at 8:36 p.m.

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — State Rep. Drew Darby is hoping the House State Affairs Committee will approve a revised version of his solar initiatives proposal sometime next week.

But how many people would be willing to pay \$1 extra on their monthly electric bills to support the development of an industry that is already eager to expand in sunny Texas, but says the state lacks the incentives offered in other places?

According to a poll Darby cited Wednesday morning — 68 percent.

"We know Texans are willing to pay for the initiative," the San Angelo Republican said at a news conference at the state Capitol.

But a majority of the \$300 million to \$400 million in fees expected to come in during the five-year program that would be set up if House Bill 2961 passes will come from manufacturers and large businesses. The original version of the bipartisan bill includes a provision that allows residents and small businesses — who would pay smaller fees under the program anyway — to opt out. Darby and his staff are still working to revise the bill after encountering opposition from some manufacturers, investors and other groups who have questioned the value of the program and expressed reservations about the amount of the fee.

On Wednesday, Darby said the originally proposed fees — \$1 for residential, \$5 for commercial and \$50 for industrial meters — have been reduced "in an effort to address some (committee) members' concerns." But the optional and nonoptional provisions will remain the same. There is still a \$250 limit on manufacturers who may have more than one meter.

A fiscal note attached to the original bill says the program would cost about \$100,000 a year to operate. The estimated fee income Darby gave Wednesday accounts for the reduced fees.

Because of the opt-out provision, the potential amount that might be generated from residents and small businesses is variable. Utility providers like Atmos Energy that give customers the option of donating to low-income energy assistance programs collect a modest amount each year. In the company's 12-state area, it collected only

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about \$1 million last year — \$4,000 of that from Tom Green County.

"We wish we had lots more money and customer contributions and we wish the company could do more," said Shelley Burnett, a spokeswoman for Atmos Energy's San Angelo office, noting that she was actually surprised by the \$4,000 brought in within the county during a rocky economic climate.

The Concho Valley Community Action Agency, which distributes funding from donations collected by Atmos as well as the state energy assistance program, said that while consumer donation-based funding may be small, it goes a long way. The agency will collect from \$110,000 to \$120,000 from utility providers in the county this year. That is a small portion of the \$2.6 million it gets from the state — which collects 65 cents per thousand kilowatt hour on unregulated utility providers, such as retail electricity companies, to help low-income Texans pay utility bills.

"It makes up a small part, but it allows us to do thing we couldn't do otherwise because we don't have discretionary funds," said Mark Bethune, the agency's executive director.

Darby's office has the same argument for the solar initiatives program: a modest amount, at least in comparison to the size of the multibillion-dollar solar industry, that will go a long way in helping attract the industry to the state.

"Texas leads the nation in every major energy sector except the fastest growing sector, and that's solar," Darby said Wednesday. But, a lack of economic support, he said, "means it's largely bypassing Texas."

Some initial costs are expected as renewable energy — primarily wind — producers prepare to plug into the major transmission lines in the works that will carry energy from West Texas to major metropolitan areas by 2015. Development of those lines has been key for the renewable energy industry because wind turbines are currently producing more energy than the infrastructure of power transmission lines can move.

A revised version of Darby's bill, which is similar to one that died along with dozens of other solar-related initiatives last session, might be heard in committee next week. The original version was left pending last week following a hearing in which the committee chairman and two groups expressed reservations about the still-high cost of solar technology.

The bill still faces opposition from groups like conservative think-tank Texas Public Policy Foundation that believe the cost of solar technology is too high and disagree with imposing a fee on consumers to generate higher cost energy.

Ryan Brannan, a policy analyst with the group who testified against the bill in committee last week, said the charge should be entirely optional.

"This should all be about the consumer and giving the consumer the best price available, the best choices available, the best access to the market available and if we are passing bills that raise fees and raise the price on the consumer in order to come back and charge them for inefficient energy, that doesn't even pass the sniff test with us," Brannan said.

A variety of representatives from alternative energy and solar panel manufacturing companies, many of who testified in favor of the bill last week, joined Darby at the news conference Wednesday.

Executives from Suntech Power — the world's largest producer of solar panels — Applied Materials, SPG Solar and Solar City described Texas as a "sleeping giant" in the solar energy industry.

"There's tremendous opportunity over the next years to attract manufacturing

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facilities to Texas," a representative from Suntech said.

Local economic development officials expressed enthusiastic support for the bill Tuesday, saying it would give them one more tool to attract businesses from an industry they see as key to the economic future of San Angelo and West Texas.

John Dugan, vice president of marketing and recruitment for the San Angelo Chamber of Commerce, said San Angelo is actually better suited to produce solar energy than wind, at least compared to windier West Texas cities further north like Sweetwater. A 1,600-acre solar energy project that has been in the works since 2009 could break ground by the end of the year.

"I think alternative energy as a whole is going to be a boon for all of West Texas as we move forward," said Dugan, who has worked closely with New York-based Terra-Gen Power, the company developing the project.

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