

Opinion

Another Voice / Electricity generation

Another Voice: State shouldn't bail out nuclear power plants

Updated: July 27, 2016, 11:02 AM Published: July 27, 2016, 11:02 AM

By Charley Bowman

Coal-fired power plants are going the way of the dodo bird, and nuclear power seems to be on a similar trajectory. Nuclear plants have recently closed in Wisconsin, Florida and Vermont, and the queue of scheduled closings now totals 10 percent of the nation's 99 reactors. Many other reactors are at risk because 56 percent of our nation's reactors are currently unprofitable, according to Bloomberg.

Included in Bloomberg's list of closing reactors are the Ginna plant east of Rochester and the FitzPatrick plant near Owsego. Earlier this year Ginna's owner, Exelon, called on Gov. Andrew Cuomo to consider a \$4 billion subsidy over the next 12 years.

If approved by the PSC, the proposed nuclear bailout, called a Zero Emission Credit, will be unique in the nation. The laudable reasoning behind ZEC is the following: carbon dioxide emissions are a social cost, a burden to society. If a power plant does not emit carbon dioxide in the production of electricity, the plant's owners should be paid for that.

For Ginna and FitzPatrick, ZECs are worth \$170,000 per job in the first year, rising to \$360,000 per job in 12 years. The 1,300 workers at both plants earn a combined average of \$100,000 annually. In the first year, 90 percent of the annual operational costs will be subsidized by New York ratepayers, and in year 12, the ZEC subsidy will greatly exceed those costs.

There are other concerns. Does New York need the electricity from Ginna and FitzPatrick? Last spring, the controller of the state's electrical grid determined that electricity supply or transmission would not be affected should both be shuttered tomorrow.

No replacement power is needed. Secondly, Exelon asked Illinois to financially aid its nuclear plants in that state, but the Illinois legislature refused, favoring instead increased emphasis on renewable sources of energy and energy efficiency. Similarly, California plans to replace the Diablo Canyon nuclear power with renewable energy, an approach that's expected to cost less to ratepayers than to keep it in operation.

New York State should mimic California and Illinois' efforts to replace nuclear power with renewable energy. The nuclear jobs lost could be mitigated by the state's current growth in the renewable energy solar sector, about 40 percent annually. The number of workers added last year to the state's solar industry was double the number employed at Ginna and FitzPatrick.

New York State should not subsidize an industry hobbled by zero job growth and safety worries. Instead, Cuomo should award ZECs to the producers of clean power – hydro, solar and wind. This policy would double the state's investment in clean energy, and boost the current renewable job growth exponentially.

Charley Bowman is co-chairman of the Environmental Justice Task Force of the Western New York Peace Center.