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Another Voice: Solar power is needed to solve climate crisis

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A recent **Another Voice** column questioned New York State’s renewable energy policy, citing imported fossil-fuel-generated energy from other states and hydropower from Canada.

It is true that about half of our electricity is generated by natural gas from other states. The 2019 Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA) seeks to phase out this gas-generated power. But at the same time, the writers lamented the loss of jobs from the closing of power plants using these out-of-state sources.

The CLCPA provides for a just transition, including assisting communities and workers affected by shutdowns of coal and gas power plants. Solar, wind and thermal energy, innovations in storage, grid improvement and electrification of transportation and building heating will all create new, long-range, family-sustaining jobs.

The three communities that the writers claim have had a “mass exodus” of jobs have involved a coal power plant defeated by market forces, a gas plant functioning at less than 10% and an aged and unsafe nuclear plant 25 miles from New York City, risking catastrophe. Environmental groups agree with organized labor that New York State should produce our electricity rather than importing fossil fuel from other states and hydropower from Quebec via the “extension cord” – the Champlain-Hudson Power Express.



The climate crisis is real, and growing numbers of people recognize that strong storms, fires, floods and pollution signal threats to civilization. Worldwide, rapid action is necessary if we are to pass a livable planet on to future generations. Fortunately, these actions will also lead to far more job opportunities than are lost from coal, oil, nuclear and gas.

Solar energy is an essential part of the solution so it is unfortunate that some commonly repeated but incorrect beliefs about solar energy are repeated. Solar panels are not made of dangerous substances; they are mainly harmless glass and silicon with steel support structures.

Some solar panels are attached with lead solder, about half an ounce per panel, though the industry is phasing out even that small quantity. (A car battery has about 19 pounds of lead.) This tiny amount of lead solder does not touch the ground and cannot leach into soil any more than your car leaches lead in your driveway.

Cadmium, another substance invoked in anti-solar messaging, is only used in 2% of solar panels, not the type used in utility-scale solar fields – and is phasing out. Solar panels last at least two decades and are fully recyclable. They do not harm the ground underneath them, which can be used to graze animals and raise shade-friendly and pollinator-attracting crops.

The National Renewable Energy Laboratory reports that one-sixth of 1% of land in the U.S. could be used for solar power to meet all of our energy needs, though that would not be necessary as we also have wind and hydropower for electricity.

All our energy comes from the sun. The energy sources we've been burning, thereby choking ourselves and our planet, came from solar energy stored in tiny organisms millions of years ago. We need to stop digging it up and we don't have a good chance of survival if we do.

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