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Sue Legg: Approve solar incentives, reject utility deceptions

By Sue Legg

Special to The Sun

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"Gainesville Solar City U.S.A. has a nice ring to it. Let's make it happen ... And so, we are proud that the city-owned Gainesville Regional Utilities has set out to become the first public utility in America to adopt a European-style 'feed in tariff' program to encourage local businesses to incorporate solar photovoltaic systems on their buildings." — The Sun in a Nov. 18, 2008, editorial



Doug Finger/The Gainesville Sun

A technician cleans solar panels atop a downtown Gainesville building.

"Nowhere is the tepid embrace of solar more confounding than in the Sunshine State. Florida ranks third in the nation for solar potential, but 18th for solar capacity installed, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association." — The Sun in a Sept. 20, 2014, editorial

We can build upon Gainesville's example and truly become the Sunshine State in deed as well as in word by voting "yes" on Amendment 4 in the August primary and voting "no" on Amendment 1 in the November general election.

Amendment 4 reduces taxes on solar improvements and thus makes it less expensive for businesses to invest in solar power. Amendment 1 discourages solar power competition by restating current Florida law that only public utilities may sell solar power.

Amendment 4 authorizes the Florida Legislature to exempt business property owners from real and tangible personal property tax increases on solar power improvements. Residential owners are exempt from those increased taxes, but business owners are not. If passed by the Legislature, these tax exemptions will take effect January 1, 2018, with an end date on December 31, 2037.

Making these tax exemptions available to business property owners will encourage investment in solar power, thus the League of Women Voters of Alachua County/Gainesville strongly recommends voting "yes" for Amendment 4 in the August primary election.

Amendment 1, the "Utilities Amendment," twists language used by advocates of a free solar power market (such as "solar energy choice") to achieve the opposite effect. It is a masterpiece of Orwellian doublespeak.

The amendment protects the existing public utility monopoly by simply restating current law that only these utilities may sell solar power. Worse yet, it strengthens utility challenges against successful solar programs, such as net metering and Gainesville's pioneering feed-in tariffs.

In the Florida Supreme Court's recent 4-3 approval of the amendment language, Justice Barbara Pariente's dissent succinctly summarized this wolf in sheep's

clothing:

"Let the pro-solar energy consumers beware. Masquerading as a pro-solar energy initiative, this proposed constitutional amendment, supported by some of Florida's major investor-owned electric utility companies, actually seeks to constitutionalize the status quo. The ballot title is affirmatively misleading by its focus on 'Solar Energy Choice,'" when no real choice exists for those who favor expansion of solar energy."

The utilities seek to "protect" consumers by preventing us from purchasing potentially less expensive third-party produced solar power. At the same time, the utilities argue that they (or the consumer) must subsidize "high-priced" utility solar because it is more expensive than burning fossil fuels.

In this double-speak lies the heart of the matter. Solar power produced by third parties is not necessarily more expensive for the consumer. It may, however, be less profitable (than fossil fuels) for the public utilities.

Shareholder profit, not consumer protection, is driving this amendment. Profit and protection are both admirable goals, but why should we sacrifice the latter through a state-sanctioned monopoly granted to promote the former?

The League of Women Voters of Alachua County/Gainesville strongly recommends voting "no" against Amendment 1 in the November general election.

— *Sue Legg is president of the Alachua County League of Women Voters.*

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