



Solar panels on top of the Ramona Apartments in Portland power the building's elevators and hallway lights, as well as heat a portion of the building's hot water.

Power outage

CITY OF PORTLAND PHOTO

State law requires solar power projects include benefits to low-income Oregonians – but no one knows how

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As their deadline approaches, policy makers are figuring out how to implement state-mandated community solar programs across Oregon.

But the challenge lies in connecting low-income ratepayers with solar power without raiding already starved energy assistance programs for the poor.

In 2016, lawmakers in Salem passed the energy-overhaul bill SB 1547. It requires Oregon phase out coal by 2035, and that 50 percent of energy used by Oregonians come from renewable resources by 2040.

Currently, the state is about 15 percent renewable energy usage. (That does not include hydroelectric power, some of which fails to meet certain renewable standards.)

The bill also mandates the Oregon Public Utility Commission – the state agency responsible for regulating utility customer rates and services – to write and adopt rules for a community solar program by July 1. The idea is that such a program will help the state boost its use of solar power, which at last estimate two years ago, accounted for less than 1 percent of total energy sources in Oregon, according to the state's

Department of Energy.

The Public Utility Commission is still in the information-gathering phase of designing a community solar program, and it's not yet clear exactly what it will look like, but it is expected to resemble other models, such as those in Colorado, Washington and Minnesota.

Generally, ratepayers on a power grid are invited to partially own or lease a solar power project. The solar panels could either be placed on the property of one of the participants, incorporated into a new development, or even located on a property that isn't affiliated with the project, such as on the roof of a big box store.

That solar energy goes directly into the power grid, and then the utility company pays the ratepayers who funded the project for the use of the power it generated in the form of a credit on their electricity bill.

That size of the credit would depend on the amount of electricity generated and by the size of their contribution to the project, which can come in the form of an up-front investment or monthly payment, depending on how the commission decides to design the program.

Community solar is a viable option for

people who want to expand solar infrastructure in their community, but who rent or live somewhere that isn't ideal for solar panels, such as in a condo or beneath thick shade trees.

While solar power has a long-held reputation as being out of reach for lower-income ratepayers, Oregon lawmakers included in the bill a provision that requires 10 percent of the energy output go to benefit those who cannot afford the start-up investment.

But what exactly that means and how to meet that requirement is up for debate.

The Public Utility Commission has held a series of workshops bringing together stakeholders including utility companies, developers and energy experts to discuss what the program should look like.

At the last workshop in this phase of planning, hosted by Portland General Electric on Feb. 14, the commission sought feedback from stakeholders on how to meet the low-income requirement.

It became clear during the workshop that this unfunded mandate poses serious challenges, and if it isn't funded correctly, it could potentially cause more harm than good for low-income ratepayers.

One option for funding the bill credit is to reallocate existing state and federal funds that support energy assistance and weatherization programs across the state. Doing so, however, could mean kicking thousands of households off of energy assistance programs, and there is no guarantee the bill credit would be substantial.

For those who cannot afford to pay their electricity bill, there are federal and state funded energy-assistance programs that help low-income ratepayers avoid getting their power shut off that could be used to fund the solar credit.

Because this winter has been unusually cold, "an unprecedented number of people are asking for help," Margot Bryant told stakeholders at the workshop. She manages social equity policy at Portland General Electric, and said 49 percent of the customers receiving assistance on their electric bills through PGE are elderly.

According to Dan Elliot, a policy analyst for Oregon Housing and Community Services, the state currently has two energy assistance funding options: the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program

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