

Columbus Beyond Coal Team Meeting

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ENR 7981

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This meeting was organized by Neil Waggoner of the Sierra Club Beyond Coal team in Ohio. Beyond Coal is the Sierra Club's campaign to get coal plants across the country to convert to natural gas or preferably to shut down. It is funded by a large donation from Michael Bloomberg and has been extremely successful. As of last year [almost 200 coal plants](#) had been shut down.

In Ohio the campaign has targeted utilities AEP and First Energy, and in the Columbus area the main target has been AEP. For the past two years, the campaign was focused on stopping the "coal bailouts" – proposals by AEP and First Energy to put surcharges on customer bills to pay for keeping open four of its old inefficient coal plants. The utilities had to get the approval of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio to do this, so the campaign was aimed at getting PUCO not to approve these proposals. I participated by writing filing statements with PUCO opposing the plan, signing postcards and petitions, and attending PUCO hearings.

Shortly before the PUCO was supposed to make a decision on the coal bailouts, Sierra Club's Beyond Coal team [reached a landmark deal](#) with AEP. AEP would convert two of its coal plants to natural gas by 2029, and it would build 500 MW of wind power and 400 MW of solar in Ohio starting in 2018. This would double all wind and quadruple all solar generation in the state. In return, the Sierra Club would drop its objection to AEP adding a charge onto consumer bills.

Most of the other environmental groups in the state, as well as the Ohio Consumers Counsel, came out against the Sierra Club deal with AEP because it still allowed the utility to charge consumers to keep open two coal plants. However, these objections became moot when the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission [nixed the coal bailouts](#) altogether. At that point AEP pivoted to concentrate on [getting approval for 900 MW](#) of solar and wind generation, saying it wanted to stick to the deal with the Sierra Club because this is the future of power generation. First Energy, by contrast, is rewriting and will resubmit its original proposal for coal bailouts.

The purpose of the meeting Thursday was to talk about how to create a citizens grassroots movement to support AEP's efforts to move into solar and wind generation. AEP has promised to build 400 MW of solar generation in southeast Ohio, the area of the state hardest hit by the loss of coal jobs. This much generation will likely attract a factory to manufacture solar panels to the area. However, it is unlikely there will be one enormous project worth 400 MW of generation. Rather, AEP will likely seek to build several utility grade solar farms, and each of those will have to get approval from PUCO. Such approval is not a done deal. In 2013, PUCO [refused to approve](#) a 50 MW solar project that AEP wanted to build in Noble County that would have created hundreds of jobs. We don't want to see that happen again.

About eight people were at the meeting, and all of them had good ideas. Neil already had several hundred postcards printed that people could sign expressing approval for the project and addressed to PUCO. We also have a showing and panel discussion for the documentary [Cheshire, Ohio](#) – the town that AEP literally bought out so it would not have to clean up its Gavin coal plant – scheduled for October 6. I offered to write a letter to the editor once I can get some talking points. We talked about making presentations to various progressive political groups in town, as well as a community meeting when AEP sends its proposal to PUCO.

Currently AEP is in the preliminary stages of putting together a proposal. It has just sent out a Request for Information from interested parties that could get involved in building solar projects. Once it receives answers to that, it will put together a request for proposals from companies it could contract with to build the actual projects. From there it will decide on who to work with and how much it will cost, then send a proposal to PUCO. At that point, PUCO will open a docket for comments, and that's when we want to gather citizen comments supporting the plan. That is likely to happen in spring 2017.

One possible pitfall is that AEP will likely ask to put a charge on consumer bills to help pay for building these new solar projects. That means some business groups will come out against it, possibly calling it a "solar bailout," just as we called the coal plant charges a coal bailout. We will need to be ready with a strategy and talking points to counter this.

One strategy we discussed was pulling together the coalition of churches and businesses that opposed freezing the renewable energy standards in 2013. In fact, one reason the Sierra Club pursued the deal with AEP so persistently is they do not think the legislature is going to unfreeze the renewable standards. If anything, the legislature will likely make the freeze permanent. That means we need a different strategy to jump start the renewables industry in Ohio. AEP's commitment to building 900 MW of renewable energy in the state would do just that. It would create hundreds if not thousands of jobs and make Ohio an industry leader in this area.

Another possible pitfall we discussed is that with AEP in charge of such a large share of the renewables market in Ohio, that could affect the smaller solar producers in the state. The renewable energy freeze drove many of them out of business, but a few are left, and they install a lot of residential and business solar projects in the state. There is a debate in the renewables community about centralized solar farms run by utilities vs decentralized and distributed power. Most environmentalists like distributed better, but too much of that threatens the profits of utility companies. Currently people who have solar panels on their homes often generate more electricity than they need, meaning they pay the utility nothing, and in some cases the utility pays them for the extra power. Many states are now passing net metering laws to discourage this. So small solar producers are already facing a hostile market, and having AEP in charge of so much of the solar energy in Ohio could exacerbate this, driving more of them out of business. We don't want to see that happen, as Sierra Club has partnerships with many small solar producers.

A third issue is the wind setback law also passed by the state legislature in 2013. This was a direct attack on the wind industry by fossil-fuel funded groups. The law requires wind mills to be a quarter mile from any structure that holds people, even though a fracking drill pad can literally be 20 feet from a farmhouse. The wind industry keeps trying to overturn this, but so far hasn't been able to. For AEP to build any wind projects, much less 500 MW worth, that wind setback law will have to be overturned. Ohio's largest wind farm in Van Wert, Ohio, was built before this law went into effect and could not have been built under it. Ohio State University buys 25 percent of its power from this wind farm. I hope the university will work with AEP and other stakeholders to address this issue so that we can get wind power going again in the state.