



# **SOLAR ENERGY ASSOCIATION OF MAINE**

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## **Testimony in Support of LD 952**

### **Resolve, To Create a 21st-Century Electric Grid**

**Steven Weems, Board Member, Solar Energy Association of Maine**

**President, Dirigo Community Solar Group**

**To the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology**

**April 13, 2023**

Senator Lawrence, Representative Zeigler, and other members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology: my name is Steve Weems, a Board Member of the Solar Energy Association of Maine; also President of Dirigo Community Solar Group, a nonprofit association of 14 small, member-owned community solar farms. We think LD 952 addresses serious, important electric energy issues in a thoughtful way. Therefore we support it, albeit tentatively, because we just don't understand its content and the implications well enough yet. Hopefully this bill will facilitate a productive discussion about how to address the issues of planning and operating the electric grid required in the 21st Century.

We're on the record in previous legislative sessions about the need for more effective, long-term integrated grid planning. We support the concept of designating a statewide distribution system operator (DSO), aligned with State renewal energy goals, and with a commitment to planning and implementing the dynamic, two-way grid of the future necessary to integrate distributed energy resources into the system. Our existing reliance on investor-owned utilities (IOUs) to do this on their own is not working. The IOUs are reactive and oriented toward maximizing short-term shareholder return. We think the tentative steps being taken in the direction of integrated grid planning are too weak because the ultimate responsibility for planning still is the responsibility of the existing IOUs. We thank Representative Runte for bringing forth a bill to break out of these doldrums.

We also like his emphasis on mandating the engagement of a consultant with appropriate outlook and experience, if one exists! We need to stop talking to ourselves about these matters and bring in new thinking. Dysfunction is baked into the existing system, and seemingly intractable. We want to support this kind of break-out initiative.

This said, we are unclear about the powers and duties of a DSO, as currently outlined in LD 952, and how it could co-exist with the existing IOUs. It probably is fair to say one purpose of the Resolve would be to sort out questions like this. But the list of “musts” (Section 1, subsection 1) and “maybes” (Section 1, subsection 2) appears to be sufficiently sweeping (planning, marketing, and operation) to be at odds with the sentence that the “The DSO design may not include the acquisition or ownership of any transmission and distribution utility assets.” It is hard to imagine how a third-party DSO could be effective if the IOUs still own and operate the system assets.

Maybe the answer is to rework the bill so the Governor’s Energy Office (GEO) and the consultant have more latitude. Perhaps the resolve should simply mandate an open-ended look at Maine’s existing system of electrical system planning, potential distribution patterns of future energy resources, and the value of having a DSO aligned with Maine’s clean energy goals.

For example, perhaps the consultant could start with Dr. Richard Silkman’s work titled ***A New Energy Policy Direction for Maine, A Pathway to a Zero-Carbon Economy by 2050***; analyze and modify it as deemed necessary; and then develop one or more options about how to actually plan and implement an electrical system to achieve a zero-carbon economy by 2050. Caveat: Dr. Silkman said this work is based many assumptions. He simply defined one path that indicates a zero-carbon economy can be achieved, at a digestible cost. We are just using his work as an example of the value of good analysis, then being clear about the goal and taking a fresh, creative look about what is actually needed to get there.

This is the approach we so desperately need, given how trapped we are in the straightjacket of entrenched structure. Hopefully LD 952 can be worked to become the launching pad for such an effort.