

Trigaux: Keen to preserve own power, Florida electric utilities up fight against solar

From The Tampa Bay Times

Got to hand it to the powers who so deftly control Florida's electricity market. Just when solar power finally shows signs of progress in the Sunshine State, the cabal of electric utility monopolies and the Tallahassee political machine so beholden to their cash contributions find a new way to say No.

On Wednesday, a group with the quick-stamped name of Consumers for Smart Solar unveiled a petition drive to place an amendment dealing with solar energy on the 2016 ballot. It will need to collect nearly 700,000 signatures.

This effort is clearly meant to distract and disrupt an existing amendment drive by a group called Floridians for Solar Choice. Its goal: to prevent the state from regulating small, private solar companies that provide up to 2 megawatts of solar energy to properties that border them.

Neither of these extreme efforts to amend the state constitution would be happening if big power companies like Duke Energy and Florida Power & Light were not so obsessed with maintaining their power grip, both on Florida's electricity market and the state's political bodies that pander to big utilities.

The very power companies that for years insisted that solar power has no future in this "cloudy" state have been forced to adopt new strategies now that solar is on the rise.

We like solar power, utility execs now purr. But only on our terms.

Well, those terms are crummy terms for Floridians. To undermine the progress of Floridians for Solar Choice's pursuit of a pro-solar state amendment, the power industry's helped unleash a second group Wednesday that seeks its own amendment. What's in that amendment? Very little to advance solar power. But plenty to make sure it stays under the thumb of the electric monopolies.

If this column was about House of Cards-inspired political shenanigans, I'd salute the ruthless cleverness of a second "consumer" group seeking its own amendment.

Persuading Florida voters to support any constitutional amendment is hard. Demanding that voters pick between solar amendments that sound pro-consumer is a great way to make sure neither happens.

Presto: Status quo preserved!

I could write a nearly identical column about how big power companies and their Tally allies are lobbying the Florida Supreme Court to block the Floridians for Solar Choice initiative from ever making it to the 2016 ballot.

Such manipulation would not be so sad if our utilities spent less time in denial.

Alternative energy, including solar power, is gaining global ground every day.

But in sunny Florida, utilities still exert the greatest energy and keenest focus on (1) self-preservation, (2) maximizing shareholder profits for Wall Street investors and (3) ensuring Florida's political leaders — from Gov. Rick Scott and Attorney General Pam Bondi to top legislators and the handpicked minions who pretend to run the Public Service Commission — remain deep, dark and content in the pocket of the status quo.

Contact Robert Trigaux at rtrigaux@tampabay.com.