

LARGO STICKS WITH DUKE ENERGY — FOR NOW...

CITY WILL REASSESS UTILITY'S CLEAN ENERGY PROGRAM

/BY: **Carlos Moncada**

LARGO—City commissioners have opted, at least for now, to continue with a controversial clean energy program that has fallen short of initial expectations.

Commissioners unanimously decided Jan. 20 to postpone a decision on whether to pull out of Duke Energy's Clean Energy Connection program. The program allows subscribers to receive credits on their electric bills in exchange for a fixed monthly fee that helps pay for the utility's solar power system.

The 6-0 vote to delay action will provide commissioners and staffers more time to assess the program's effectiveness and re-evaluate the city's long-term energy transition goals.

Pinellas County and the city of Clearwater, which is considering dropping Duke and forming its own utility, withdrew from the program last year. They claimed, among other things, that its benefits do not outweigh the costs.

Three other cities, St. Petersburg, Dunedin and Safety Harbor, are still enrolled though some are having second thoughts.

Largo joined the program in 2020 as a way to help meet its ambitious goal of shifting to 100 percent clean, renewable energy like solar and wind by 2050.

Since then, however, the city has paid more in program fees — \$159,410 — than what it has received back from the St. Petersburg-based utility in energy credits, according to city staff members.

Current projections show Largo's investment after 33 years will provide a "cumulative net savings" ranging from \$772,000 to \$1.5 million, rather than the \$2.2 million initially estimated. Moreover,

the city won't see a "net positive" return until 2032, two years later than what was originally forecast.

Staff members said the program's early performance was affected by hurricane damage to Duke Energy's solar arrays, most of them in north Florida, as well as COVID-era supply chain issues that have since been resolved.

They said the credits, which increase annually by 1.5 percent as of last year, will eventually surpass the fees and create long-term cost savings for the city, which is currently at 38 percent renewable energy.

If Largo opts out of the program, it would lose what it has paid into it thus far.

"As I said before, the only way to guarantee we lose money is to back out now," Mayor Woody Brown said. "I wasn't super supportive of this to begin with. But we are where we are. And I think the best decision would be to stick with it for a little while. If we stick with it, we are very likely we'll end up giving money back to our residents, rather than just spending money."

Commissioner John Lauser, who at one point suggested the city could run its own solar program instead, made the motion for the delay.

"I would be comfortable letting it go on as long as we come to an agreement on some parameters," he said. "If [the numbers] are trending downward, we don't want to be involved."

Mike DiBrizzi was the lone commissioner to say he was ready to pull out immediately.

He cited Duke's continued rate increases — at least two since the program started — that have contributed to the growing affordability crisis. He also mentioned the financial risk to taxpayers — who he said are "subsidizing" the company's profit margin — if another hurricane damages the utility's solar power plants scattered around the state.

"It's been said that leaving the program will guarantee a loss," said DiBrizzi, who ultimately voted in favor of the delay. "But we've been losing money from day one on this program. It's just, to me, not worth it."

Commissioner Curtis Holmes asked utility representatives what their motive was in creating the program, touted as a way



Mayor Woody Brown said "the only way to guarantee we lose money is to back out now" from Duke Energy's clean energy program. Photo courtesy City of Largo

for residential and business customers to access solar energy without panels.

"Why would you want to do this for us?" he asked. "You're cutting your profit down."

Jeff Baker, Duke's government and community relations manager, said the utility created the program because local governments "were crying for assistance" to help them meet their clean energy targets.

"We as a company had to meet that need for our customers, or they would have done something else," he said.

Baker said the program, which enrolls 13 Florida municipalities, has a waiting list and that if Largo pulled out, "we're just going to pass this to another customer."

City Manager John Curp cautioned commissioners about withdrawing before having a back-up plan to help meet the city's alternative energy goals.

"This program is a tool to implement a policy that a prior commission adopted," he said. "Before we take away a tool, I think it's very important we review the policy. Because if we take the tool away before we adjust the policy, then we are left to try to manage a program that, as it sits right now, is unattainable."

A local environmentalist urged commissioners to continue their commitment of 100 percent clean, renewable electricity by 2050, regardless of their decision.

"These are legitimate concerns being raised by communities across Florida as they work to scale clean energy through utility-led programs," said Lisa Hinton, of the Sierra Club Suncoast Group.

Duke Energy's solar panels sustained major damage during Hurricane Ian in 2022. Photo courtesy of Duke Energy.



PINELLAS PRESS

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The Pinellas Press
is a publication
of Jofi Media, LLC | 2025

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