

WHERE'S THE GREEN IN DANE COUNTY'S GREEN ECONOMY?

Public incentives create opportunities for businesses.

BY **KIMBERLY HAZEN**



There's a new sheriff in town — in the White House to be more precise — and a new pro-green agenda has stock analysts pontificating about whether President Biden's approach to renewable energy and the environment will enable some companies to surge ahead of others.

Biden's version of the Green New Deal hopes to establish an enforcement mechanism that includes milestone targets toward a healthier environment, make investments in clean energy, climate research, and innovation, and incentivize clean energy innovation, especially in communities most impacted by climate change. In broad terms, industries that stand to benefit are most likely already in the game — companies in the fields of energy efficiency, data analysis, zero-emission transportation (including the Madison-based Zerology), construction, research, and recycling.

There are opportunities for businesses close to home. In Wisconsin, Gov. Tony Evers' budget is getting good reviews from conservationists for its focus on land, climate, and water quality initiatives. Investing in clean energy and reducing emissions from transportation are pillars of Evers' budget to address climate, including clean-energy credits for businesses, grants for research on renewable energy, expansion of the

Focus on Energy program, and job training for workers to take advantage of the clean energy economy. With the help of these initiatives, the state hopes to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.

In 2017, Dane County Executive Joe Parisi created the nation's first county Office of Energy and Climate Change to implement a county-wide climate action plan. The Dane County Climate Action Plan includes updated climate projections and over 100 policy and program recommendations associated with clean energy use, transportation, and agriculture.

For business owners, obstacles to becoming more energy efficient are melting away. As Parisi notes, there are programs and incentives available to virtually every business, nonprofit, and faith community that allows them to implement energy efficient, renewable projects with little or no money out of pocket.

The PACE (Property Assessed Clean Energy) program was launched to enable commercial property owners to obtain low-cost, long-term financing for energy efficiency, renewable energy, and water conservation. "We have found ways to create win-win situations," Parisi notes.

For utility companies, cost savings and profitability are the key factors in their

recent green energy investments. Alliant Energy has put more than one gigawatt of solar power projects, which are estimated to save over \$2 billion, in front of the Wisconsin Public Service Commission. "Cost savings to our customers is where every project plan starts," says Ben Lipari, Alliant Energy's director of resource development.

Beyond the savings, the projects have an important economic impact. The construction, operations, and maintenance associated with solar project facilities, compared to their fossil fuel counterparts, are much more beneficial to local economies. Construction of a new project means money to landowners for the sale or lease of land, and since the construction cycle can be anywhere from six to 12 months, local economies benefit from the day-to-day needs of the project and workers.

Alliant Energy estimates that its solar projects will create more than 800 local jobs in five counties. Upon completion, community rate savings are expected to be funneled into parks, local infrastructure, and other projects that benefit residents.

However, a trickle-down effect from projects of big utilities might not be the only way to look at the benefits of clean energy. Nick Hylla, executive director of Midwest Renewable Energy Association, a member-supported organization promoting clean energy, says it's really about a bigger shift in thinking. "An advanced energy economy is about mainstreaming investments and allowing the business to have a choice and the ability to take their money and invest in energy resiliency on their own facility to save them money," he notes.

Hylla adds that there is a great potential to not only distribute energy but distribute investment. "This is less about winners and losers and more about a transition of a business model from one that's closed and monopolized and investor centric to one that's more community-centered, business-centered, and free-market oriented."



This Alliant Energy installation shows that solar does not have to be captured only on large farms.