

Local Solar & Batteries Can Quickly Replace Fossil Fuels, Save Billions – and Help Slow the Climate Crisis

By Jim Warren

With countless challenges buffeting our society, I regret to report that the global climate crisis is storming ahead as if it were the only demand for our wisdom and collective action. Fortunately, two practical opportunities are available, and North Carolina has a pressing duty to start making good decisions.

The recent super-storms striking the U.S. are but the latest signal of our challenge. Similar-scaled disasters have become virtually commonplace around the world, including the soaring heat, drought and wildfires spread across western states. Perhaps worst of all, a global heat wave that began in 2014 continues, with average temperatures much higher than any years on record.

The record heat is surprising climate scientists, who had thought the absence of El Nino would significantly lower temperatures this year. But NASA reports that July 2017 edged out the previous July as the hottest month ever recorded. As heat rises, so do weather disasters.

The world's most prominent climatologist, Jim Hansen, says global warming is getting worse, not better as widely reported, and "we are running out of time." Globally and right here, people of color and the poor – those least responsible for the high energy consumption lifestyles scorching our planet – are being disproportionately harmed. And they are the most disadvantaged when extreme weather strikes.

Can North Carolina help? A few years ago, outgoing Duke Energy CEO Jim Rogers warned that distributed renewable electricity was fast pushing his industry toward

becoming a provider of backup generation and power lines, and that large, central power plants would become extinct.

Rogers was right, although his successor, Lynn Good, has chosen to fight the growth of renewables while spending millions annually to make the public think Duke Energy is green.

Now, solar power – generated where it’s needed – and the ability to store it for later use are beating fossil fuels and nuclear power in the marketplace. Recent leaps in battery technology by Tesla and others, combined with low solar prices and energy-saving advances, mean North Carolina can replace all fossil fuels used for electricity by 2030, and half by 2025. All utility customers can benefit – and avoid having tens of billions of their dollars spent by Duke Energy to build and fuel unneeded power plants, transmission lines and a massive fracked gas pipeline.

That’s according to veteran energy expert Bill Powers, a San Diego engineer schooled at Duke University, in a new report for NC WARN. His NC CLEAN PATH 2025 strategy is more reliable and far cheaper than Duke Energy’s plans for perpetual expansion of dirty power. The engineer shows how the local solar and battery approach creates far more jobs statewide – and allows people at all economic levels to save money without financial burden. Solar power is now cheaper than grid power. For businesses, solar combined with batteries are far cheaper than the grid. As Powers says of the CLEAN PATH approach:

“There are no economic or technical barriers to its adoption by the large utilities, although the smaller public utilities – cooperatives and municipals – are adopting local solar and battery storage more quickly in the U.S. so far.”

The barrier is Duke Energy's longstanding monopoly control over state government, captive customers, and public debate. The climate crisis demands democratic decision-making, not continued deference to giant corporations.

Our second vital opportunity is to cut the methane spewing into the air from throughout the natural gas and power industries. Natural gas is mainly methane, which is 80-100 times stronger than carbon dioxide at trapping heat. The world's leading scientists say the recent surge in methane emissions is a key factor in the unexpected rate of global warming in recent years.

Hansen's team insists methane emissions must be dramatically reduced immediately. Cornell scientists are among those arguing that, due to its potency, curbing the emissions is absolutely essential to averting runaway climate chaos.

The US fracking boom is a leading source of the methane. Fortunately, capturing the leaking and venting of unburned methane is quite cost effective, but tragically, the gas industry and Duke Energy are fighting requirements to do so.

To the extent Duke Energy CEO Lynn Good insists on burning natural gas, at the very least, can't we agree to minimize methane emissions? Why should that decision be left to Duke Energy executives?

Curiously, the *stated* values of Duke Energy and its critics are aligned. Duke spends tens of millions annually painting its image green because that's what customers want to hear. But the nation's largest greenhouse polluting utility remains at under 2 percent renewables in the Carolinas, in relation to its total generation, while its global warming emissions continue to grow due to the methane from fracked gas.

CEO Good has gambled that the public won't find out about the methane from natural gas – or won't care enough to act.

The CLEAN PATH report is matched with an Action Plan so cities and residents can fulfill recent pledges to help slow the accelerating climate crisis – by ramping up

solar panels at homes, buildings, parking areas, and on vacant urban land, combined with battery storage.

We're reaching out to scientists, civic leaders, news media – and all civic-minded North Carolinians across the political spectrum – to press Duke CEO Good and elected leaders to join the effort – and to demand an open, constructive discussion about our energy and climate.

NC CLEAN PATH 2025 is an opportunity for North Carolina to provide leadership in the urgent challenge to slow climate change. NC WARN is also calling on Duke Energy and smaller utilities to become aligned with the public interest in this time when leading scientists are imploring society that only dramatic action can avert runaway climate chaos.

Let's don't look back and wish we had asserted our democratic decision-making duty at this critical time.

A Chatham County Action Team is being assembled to implement the CLEAN PATH plan in Chatham. Email ncwarn@ncwarn.org if you are interested in participating. Or attend this meeting to learn more:

Thursday, October 5, 6:30-8:30 p.m.

Chatham County Community College

Multipurpose Room

764 West Street, Building 2

Pittsboro, NC 27312

Free and open to the public

Jim Warren is executive director of NC WARN, a climate justice nonprofit based in Durham.