

There is a quiet revolution underway in Florida and its name is solar power. Here in Florida one can already install an expensive solar electric generating system for one third the total cost due to state rebates and federal tax credits. But a new approach has been implemented by the Gainesville Regional Utility called "Renewable Energy Dividends."

This rule is modeled after the approach used in Germany where solar power makes up 25 percent of their total energy production. The Gainesville Regional Utility has passed a game changing rule that pays the investor a guaranteed rate for the energy generated from rooftop solar. This rate is fixed for twenty years and is sufficient to provide up to a 7 percent return on the investment.

The Gainesville approach was such a success that the annual 4 megawatt cap in the rule was reached for the next two years within a very short period of time. Germany has proven that this is the best way to motivate grassroots development of solar energy. The Gainesville FIT generated so much business for installers and for investors that they cannot keep up with the workload. Imagine what our great state of Florida would be like if the Gainesville model were applied to the entire state. Think about that. In these economic times solar installers and investors cannot keep up with the demand.

But, there is a shadow over this revolution. The 2008 Energy and Economic Development Legislation requires the Florida Public Service Commission to adopt rules that require each investor owned electric utility to supply a percentage of its retail electricity sales from renewable energy sources. They submitted a draft to the Legislature in January of this year that contained two options. One would funnel huge amounts of money to the utilities for renewable energy development. The other, modeled after the wildly successful Gainesville approach, buys the energy produced by private rooftop solar panels back at a such a high rate that it becomes one of the best investments available in these troubled times. Using this approach the installation of solar electric generating panels would be a great investment in the best of times.

Right now we are in the unique position of having Gainesville, Florida and 40 plus countries in the world as the only ones using this approach. The irony is that while the approach that is so successful in Germany was conceived in the good old USA in 1978. It is this last level of motivation that is needed to make it a truly good investment for the average citizen. Think what it would do to have that capability statewide in terms of security, disaster recovery and survivability, job creation and most of all the benefits from reducing our contribution to global warming.

But do we choose the approach that would funnel huge amounts of money to the large utilities or do we choose the approach that gives the incentive and investment benefits to the private citizen? Let's ask the legislature, Governor Crist, and the Florida Public Service Commission to choose the Gainesville FIT approach that gives the return on investment to the private citizens.