Honolulu Star-Advertiser

Honolulu, Hawaii

Date: Sunday, October 3, 2021
Frequency: Daily
Circulation: 119,186
Article Size: 31.24 column inches
Ad Value: $2749.12
Page/Section:

DHHL LANDS

'Shared solar' gets complicated

"Shared solar" is a much more user-friendly name than the state program's bureaucratic official label, "community-based renewable energy" (CBRE). By either name, the program, intended to extend access of solar energy benefits to more people who otherwise can't get their own photovoltaic installation, has not accelerated as quickly as its supporters hoped.

At the heart of this problem, as is so common in this island state, is the cost of land. CBRE, which can comprise arrays of solar panels that require some acreage, is up against competing uses for that land.

This is an especially sensitive concern for one of the agencies making plans for shared solar, the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands. Many of its Native Hawaiian beneficiaries have waited for decades for a home lease on parcels of DHHL's land base.

It is just one complication slowing the pace of what remains a promising asset. Shared solar could save more consumers on their electric bills — always a worthwhile aim — as well as advancing Hawaii toward its aggressive clean-energy goals.

Six years ago, lawmakers enacted a statute to authorize the launch of these projects, which essentially allow multiple electricity customers to participate in a solar energy project located somewhere other than on their rooftop.

It's a great idea. Advocacy groups, such as Blue Planet Foundation, point to states such as Minnesota where it's really taken off. It can help renters or those living in multifamily residences to subscribe and reap rewards in the form of lower utility costs.

But Hawaii, which does not have Minnesota's land resources, has seen a disappointingly slow start.

"It was a big lift getting the law passed," said Jeff Mikulina, the foundation's executive director. "Then it went into the big, black hole."

The Hawaii Public Utilities Commission is now in Phase 2 of the rollout, meant to ramp up production beyond the initial 8-megawatt stage.

The status of those early projects are summarized online by Hawaiian Electric (www.hawaiianelectric.com/products-and-services/customer-renewable-programs/shared-solar). They include a 28.32-kilowatt project on Maui and a 270-kW project on Oahu; both in commercial operation.

A contract for a 3-megawatt project in Kapolei has been signed, with construction due for completion in the second quarter of 2022. Two others, one on Hawaii island and one on Molokai, are still in development. Not a lot, all told.

Of course, Hawaiian Electric has plans for larger projects on Oahu, Maui, Molokai, Lanai and Hawaii island, for a total of 235 megawatts of generation.

But delivering the bigger wattages of Phase 2 projects appears to be a complex process, with a lot of technical issues to resolve (puc.hawaii.gov/energy/cbre).

In July, for example, Hawaiian Electric submitted to the PUC a draft tariff, or pricing structure, that would apply to smaller projects. And there is a draft of the request for proposal for projects dedicated to low- and moderate-income customers as well as drafts of RFPs for Molokai and Lanai projects.

There are bound to be many community concerns as well, as all of these projects take shape. Public meetings have been held for proposals on Maui and Hawaii island, and another on Oahu is in the works. Then the PUC would consider any necessary changes before applications for new projects can begin.

The latest initiative getting attention are four utility-scale solar farms proposed for DHHL on Oahu and Hawaii island. The first phase for producing 1.7 MW of power is projected to begin operating in about a year, followed by 7 MW more within three to five years.

The developer of that project, pegged for a parcel adjacent to Kalaeloa Airport, could discount electricity for 4,000 homesteaders on Oahu for 25 years.

The problem? The developer, Arion Energy, has not specified how much the discount will be. Surveying other community solar plans it could be anywhere in the 10-20% range. At mid-range, that would save $30 on a $200 bill.

Arion will have to maximize the benefit if it's to win over skeptics among the DHHL homesteaders. Among the most vocal is Robin Danner, who chairs the Sovereign Council of Hawaiian Homestead Associations.

Danner finds the use of homestead lands for anything other than leasing property to Native Hawaiian beneficiaries, including many tangential proposals on DHHL land, indefensible.

"The HHCA (Hawaiian Homes Commission Act) purpose, primary or otherwise, is not about building a road to Maunakea, it's not about building a casino, it's not about building infrastructure to feed the power grid. None of these things," she said.

Let's hope the pushback won't be so vigorous for other shared-solar projects. If it's developed with the subscriber's interest the paramount concern, as it should be, CBRE still offers a viable path toward a reduction in fossil fuels.

And those in leadership, with a sharp prodding by the consumer, must see that progress does not bog down any further.