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Arizona must address solar energy imperatives

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Arizona has many imperatives: achieving excellence in education, building better transportation systems, more actively engaging our tribal communities, creating broader access to health care, and dealing humanely with immigration challenges. I suggest we add to this list two distinct, yet related, solar energy imperatives.

The first is our environmental obligation to produce and consume more solar energy. The good news is that hardly a week goes by without a seminar or forum extolling the virtues of solar energy and the benefits of installing solar panels and water heaters. Slowly but surely, this environmental message is achieving broad acceptance.

The second is our economic development imperative to help ensure prosperity for current and future generations of Arizonans. This obligation is not about going green or capitalizing on a quick-turn plan to stimulate the state's economic recovery. It is about taking a strategic approach to managing Arizona's long-term economic growth, and acknowledging that creating a solar energy ecosystem should be a central element of this strategy.

Imagine standing in a "Visit Arizona" picture postcard, in a hot-air balloon gliding at 3,000 feet. The currents float us around the Valley. In all directions are a sea of solar panels on the roofs of houses, commercial establishments, schools, offices and warehouses. Off to the south and west are vast fields filled with utility-scale photovoltaic and solar thermal installations. They are all generating power. They are conspiring to reduce our carbon footprint and our dependence on foreign oil. They are helping to restore our atmosphere.

This scenario does not require a considerable leap of faith. It most likely will happen.

We pump more helium into our balloon, and up it goes. The houses blur, and the great transportation arteries of our interstate highways and railroads come into focus. These arteries are filled with trucks and trains carrying millions of solar panels and the structural iron that will form installation grids. We rise farther and notice these arteries extend well beyond Arizona's borders.

Then we run the imaginary film in reverse and see the trucks and trains backing up into factory loading docks, taking delivery of panels and iron. These materials are destined for Arizona, but the loading docks are in New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Texas and perhaps even Mexico.

Reverse even more, and we can sense the wages and associated benefits accruing to workers and families in those regions. We see this economic wealth multiplying across their local economies, helping to create better schools, medical care and social services, and reducing pressure to raise taxes. We see economic growth and prosperity.

But unfortunately, far too little of it is occurring in Arizona.

This Dickensian "ghost of economic future" scenario for Arizona is avoidable, but it requires strong, visionary leadership. Arizonans have a collective responsibility to demand that our lawmakers multitask, that they address current budgetary issues while also enacting Senate Bill 1403 and several solar-related House bills that will drive long-term economic growth.

Jeffrey Luth is executive director of Az4Solar.org. He can be reached at 480-703-9983 or jeff@az4solar.org.