

# Gregg Hoffmann: Clean energy framework will be introduced

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A pair of state Democrat legislators plan to introduce a framework of bills that could build on Gov. Tony Evers' clean energy plan.

Milwaukee Democrats Sen. Chris Larson and Rep. Supreme Moore Omokunde seek "to speed up deployment of clean energy projects, maximize energy efficiency, update building codes and support the transition to electric vehicles."

The package would be introduced in the next legislative session and include specific targets for lowering greenhouse gas emissions to 60 percent of 1990 levels by 2030 and 15 percent of those levels by 2050 to ensure compliance with the Paris Climate Accords.

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The bills would seek to facilitate the transition from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy sources, as well as identify communities most vulnerable to climate change and a clean energy transition, according to a release from the lawmakers.

"We're going to offer you a framework that talks about housing and making sure that people have renewable sources of energy in housing, that we can lower costs in housing, that we're talking about economic equity," said Omokunde in the announcement on June 16. "As we switch over to a greener economy and a greener infrastructure, that we're able to make sure that those who are currently employed can have a just transition."

For backers of clean energy involvement by state government, the proposal has a

lot of desirable elements. But, an earlier initiative by Democrats was not able to get a hearing by Republican-controlled committees. Last fall, Democratic Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes, Rep. Greta Neubauer, D-Racine, and other lawmakers unveiled a package of 22 bills to combat climate change. The proposals were based on recommendations from the Governor's Task Force on Climate Change. They called for funding programs and policy changes to support energy efficiency, sustainable farming practices, training for clean energy jobs and a just transition to renewable energy.

The package failed to pass after Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, refused to bring the proposals for a hearing.

"This isn't a serious effort and is nothing more than pandering to the very liberal base of WI Dems," Vos tweeted at the time. "And they wonder why they can't win elections outside of Madison and Milwaukee?"

The recent package "would create a fund for reducing the effects of facility closures or job layoffs in industries that rely on fossil fuels. Lawmakers also plan to propose a bill that would create a program that pays companies to hire workers who lose their jobs as the state transitions away from fossil fuels in its energy mix." The state's plan estimates more than 41,000 jobs could be created by 2030 and more than 195,000 jobs by 2050 under its recommendations."

Many advocates of clean energy and green business believe progress has been made, but that more aggressive movement needs a combination of private sector and local, state and federal government initiatives to approach global climate change goals.

Many Republicans at the state and federal levels believe the government initiatives are too costly and point to the progress of utilities and other businesses as proof that the private sector can handle the transition to clean energy.

In 2015, then Gov. Scott Walker and Republican lawmakers approved cuts to scientists at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, reduced the agency's funding and scrubbed climate change language from the DNR's website.

In 2019, Vos said he didn't know if climate change was real, but said it "probably" is. He also said there was no purpose for Gov. Evers' climate change task force. More recently, he and around 40 GOP lawmakers asked the U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency to issue a waiver for reformulated gas requirements in southeastern Wisconsin.

“The Democrats’ answer to skyrocketing gas prices and the possibility of summer brownouts is to triple down on the ‘Green New Deal’ disaster that would accelerate the pain on family budgets,” said Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, in a statement. “Millions of Wisconsinites are getting crushed in the real world and Democrats are still in fantasy land.”

So, the partisan political divide in the state legislature looks to still be the biggest obstacle to the newest proposal. Larson said in the recent announcement of a climate change framework that climate change should have been addressed ages ago and blamed Republicans for the delay.

“Republicans that have gerrymandered themselves into an artificial majority have decided that they would rather give out tax cuts and pursue Foxconn than actually tackle the existential crisis our neighbors demand,” he said.

While the partisan debate has continued, dozens of projects have been started in the state by utilities, private sector companies, coops and nonprofits. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Wisconsin ranked ninth in the country in 2020 in ethanol production. At the time, the state had nine ethanol plants, primarily private sector facilities with some government subsidies.

The state has made progress in power plant conversion by utilities. In 2020, coal-fired power plants provided 39% of Wisconsin’s electricity net generation, down from a high of 82% in 1997, according to UEIA statistics.

Wisconsin lagged in wind and solar energy. Wind generated electricity accounted for .3 percent of state electricity and 4% came from solar. The stats predated the announcements of Alliant, Xcel and others about new wind and solar developments. Subsidies from government funding will play some role in these projects.

But, more projects could be started, in Wisconsin and elsewhere, if government at the state and federal levels would be more aggressive in energy policy efforts.

“Investors are waiting in the wings to deploy capital for clean energy, with this industry poised to be the major engine of 21st-century prosperity,” Leah Stokes, an associate professor of political science at the University of California at Santa

Barbara, said in a Washington Post story. “Without these government incentives, that capital won’t get deployed. With them, we are poised to have a prosperous clean energy economy.”

*-Gregg Hoffmann is a Wisconsin journalist with almost 50 years of experience covering environment, politics, business, sports and other topics. Hoffmann, also an emeritus lecturer from UW-Milwaukee, has served as an administrator/editor of [WisBiz Green](#) and [Battleground Wisconsin](#) Facebook pages that are affiliated with [WisBusiness.com](#) and [WisPolitics.com](#)*