

# Valerie Heth: Community solar can save small Wisconsin family farms

Posted on Friday, Sep 8, 2023

*The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.*

For 99 years, our family has owned a farm on Willis Ray Road in Whitewater. It's not only our farm but our heritage. My mother-in-law, Betty Heth, and her older sister were born here. Betty's folks, Mary Belle and Sidney Hackett, taught her the importance of being stewards of the land — and these generations before us did just that, even as they experienced hard times, from the Great Depression, World War II and years of unfavorable weather. We have continued their responsible path, looking beyond our farm to the community and the planet.

I've seen ads from the state's investor-owned big utility companies about renewable energy projects which can cover thousands of acres. However, the main opportunity for building smaller, locally controlled projects that can fit on a farmer's back 40 is illegal currently, and ridiculously, prohibited in Wisconsin. Why should the big utilities be the only ones to benefit from solar energy production? Passing new legislation, which would create a community solar program in our state, is a commonsense solution that could become law this year. The ability to build community solar projects in our state not only helps the environment, it creates an opportunity for hundreds like for Betty, and the rest of our family, to keep the farm in the family for generations to come.

The concept of community solar is simple, and wonderful. Farmers and their partners, with local zoning approval, build solar developments on land we deem unsuitable for farming or other agricultural uses. Once operational, households can subscribe to a community solar garden and source a portion of their energy through the panels. This will result in significant cost-savings. Households in other states with community solar, including Illinois and Minnesota, typically save at least 10 percent on their energy bills after signing up.

**>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword**

**notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

In these unpredictable economic times, a community solar farm would give many family farms just like ours a stable revenue source while helping to grow the local and state economy. An average landowner could make multiples of what the land would otherwise yield for income and the project would employ local labor.

Community solar generates increased property tax revenue for towns like Whitewater, offering financial support without the burdens of a new residential development, and without permanently taking land out of agricultural use. Community solar would allow us to continue to use most of our land for farming, just as Betty's parents did. This stewardship would also help future generations continue the legacy.

Community solar is also a common-sense, grassroots way to help reduce our dependence on out-of-state fuel sources and support the community's growing electricity needs, cleanly and affordably.

Without this new law, solar farms would be the limited domain of large utilities. I believe renewable energies are the future. But let's pursue this future in a way that lets local communities and folks like us compete. Let us be a part of a stewardship-driven solution that complement the agricultural legacy first cultivated by my family's ancestors a century ago.