

# Nine

## DIY OR JOIN A GROUP

*The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone;  
it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave.*

—PATRICK HENRY

**C**onnecting with a group that supports good public policy for solar will be the easiest way to get started on education, advocacy, and lobbying. But if you're not ready to join a group yet, you can certainly get started on your own.

### Lobbying by Yourself

Here's what you'll want to do if you're working solo.

First, educate yourself on the benefits of solar power in terms of energy independence, the environment, job creation, etc. Visit some of the websites or read one of the books listed in the Resources section at the end of this book.

Then, get up to speed on the situation in your state. Find out how your state compares to other states in terms of the amount of solar power already installed and the political environment for solar. You can find out your state's rank for installed solar generating capacity from the Solar Energy Industries Association.

If your state does well—for example, if it's listed in SEIA's top ten solar states—then that's good news. If your state continues its leadership that will be a significant achievement for the future. If your state adds new support for solar, that will be a plus.

However, if your state is not ranked in the top ten for installed solar or is even near the bottom, don't worry. That shows why your help is needed. States have moved up the rankings in the past and your goal should be to help your state catch up in terms of the amount of solar it has installed and the policies needed to encourage—and not discourage—more solar power, especially on rooftops.

Find out about current legislation or rules at the local, state, or federal level to help solar. While the state level has been the most important place for solar policy in the last few years, the other levels of government matter too. For example, on the local side, your city or county can decide

to go solar themselves. Or local governments can remove red tape like permitting requirements and fees that make it more difficult for local families and businesses to go solar.

On the national level, the federal government can also do a lot to help solar. But so far, the federal government has moved too slowly and not done enough to help solar or even to create a level playing field for solar to compete fairly in the marketplace against highly subsidized fossil fuels and nuclear power.

In recent years, the federal government's main contribution to spreading solar has been to offer the 30 percent federal investment tax credit for people who install solar equipment. As we discussed, this tax credit is due to start winding down in 2019 and completely expire for homeowners in 2021. After that, businesses will still be able to get the credit, but only at a reduced rate of 10 percent.

The federal government has also helped solar with programs to bring down the cost of solar panels and with scientific research to improve solar panels and batteries.

Unfortunately, the federal government has done little to help level the playing field for solar with fossil fuels and nuclear. As we saw in the chapter about subsidies, the United States still offers many more subsidies to dirty energy like oil and coal than it does to solar and other forms of clean energy.

For solar to take its rightful place as America's leading energy source, solar power will have to become cheaper

than dirty energy. The federal government can play a key role in helping correct the energy market for this to happen by charging a tax or fee on carbon emissions. That would raise the price of dirty energy, making coal, oil, and gas have to pay for the right to pollute the Commons — our shared air, waterways, soil, etc.

Economists have liked the idea of a carbon tax or fee for years because it would naturally create more market demand for clean energy from American consumers, helping the solar market to explode. And most Americans would agree that cleaning up your own mess, or paying somebody else to do it, is only fair. At the same time, a carbon fee would make solar and other clean energy relatively less expensive.

And if such a carbon fee is “revenue neutral”—that is, if all the money collected by the fee is returned to American consumers in a dividend check sent to all American adults—then this idea could have enough political support from both Republicans and Democrats to become a reality. You can learn more about this promising idea in Chapter 11. And if you decide to support a carbon fee-and-dividend, then you will want to lobby your federal representatives, both your member of Congress and your two senators, to support it too.

Finally, finish up your research by finding out about proposed government actions that could harm or slow down solar. On the state level, this would include any proposal to let utilities add a fixed charge to the electric bill

of solar homeowners. You can do all this research online yourself if you’re comfortable with that. And if you want some help, you can subscribe to email alerts from one of the groups listed in Appendix D such as Solar United Neighbors or Vote Solar that will tell you about bills coming up in your state legislature or in Washington, DC that could either help or hurt solar.

Once you feel comfortable that you’re familiar with the current solar policy needs in your city or state, start reaching out to government officials. There are several easy ways to begin:

- Reach elected officials indirectly through your local newspaper, which they or their staff read every day. Write letters to the editor urging officials to support better solar policy.
- Contact local officials such as members of your city council, county board of supervisors, or school board asking them to get more solar on local government buildings and make it easier for solar companies to do business in your area.
- Contact offices of federal officials such as your Congressional representative or your two senators. Ask them to support good solar policy in general. Or, if you know about a specific bill that would either help or hurt solar, then give your opinion about that.

Reaching out to government officials can sound scary if you've never done it before. But don't worry. They're used to hearing from citizens on all sorts of issues every day. You pay their salary, so don't be shy about telling them what you think.

Calling officials is effective. With local officials such as city council members, you may get to talk to them directly. With state or national officials such as your state representative or member of Congress, you'll get to talk to a staffer or leave a voice message. Either way, staffers will log your call, tally it with other calls on the same subject, and present a report to the elected official.

I keep the phone number of my two federal senators' and my member of Congress in my mobile phone contacts. That way, I can easily reach their offices when I want to give them my opinion about a bill that I think they'll be considering or voting on soon.

Writing can be even more effective, especially for legislators at the state and federal levels. As Congressional expert Bradford Fitch writes, "Next to having a one-on-one meeting with your congressman, sending an email or letter is the most effective way to influence undecided lawmakers."

Keep in mind that paper letters sent to offices of Congress or the Senate in Washington, DC will have to go through a security screening process. This could delay your letter by a month or more. A faster way to write to your

legislators is by email, either directly using your legislator's office email address or through the constituent contact form on the legislator's official website.

Even better is to hand deliver paper letters to a legislator's office. Advocacy groups can help their members with this. For example, Citizen's Climate Lobby offers an "Envoy" system where members of the group who live in the District of Columbia offer to deliver letters, usually in bundles, written by CCL members in other parts of the country to their federal legislators' offices on Capitol Hill. This is just one of the advantages of lobbying with a group rather than on your own, as you'll see below.

And of course, if you can get an in-person meeting with a member of a legislator's staff, or even, if you're very lucky, with the legislator himself or herself, then you've struck gold as a citizen-lobbyist. It's not hard to schedule such a meeting. But it will require you to travel to the official's office, whether in their home district, or in your state capital, or in Washington, DC. And it will be more effective if you're well prepared for how the meeting should go.

Plan to start the meeting on a positive note. Connect with the official at the beginning on something that you both agree about, even if it doesn't have to do with solar power. Then, ask for something specific, such as supporting or opposing a particular bill on solar. Keep it simple and unemotional. Give your reasons in a few short bullet points and share any printed materials you may have

brought. Finally, let the official give you his or her take on the issue and ask what it would take for them to agree to your request.

## Lobbying with a Group

Communicating with elected officials is one area where working with a group may make it easier for you.

Groups can also help you be more effective. For example, an easy way to connect with officials is to send an email or sign an online petition. Unfortunately, research has shown that such a low-touch method of communication is not particularly effective. Officials pay little attention to form emails or online petitions. Instead, it's more effective to send a personalized email, make a phone call, or write a paper letter. And of course, the most impactful way to communicate with an elected official is to meet with them in person.

You can do all those things on your own if you're motivated enough and if you're comfortable working as a solo player. But especially when it comes to setting up an in-person meeting with a senator or member of Congress, it will be much easier if you work with a group. The group can schedule the meeting for you, send other members to accompany you to the meeting, and even provide you with

advice and materials to make your case convincingly for that particular official.

You can certainly form your own group. For example, you can recruit family and friends to get together and make calls. You can even appoint one person from your group to schedule an appointment with an official that your whole group will attend.

However, if you join an existing group that does these things already, then you won't have to search around for people to recruit to help you. You can just tap into the group's list of existing members in your area. You'll also get the benefit of that group's experience, reputation, and educational materials for communicating with elected officials.

And the good news is that there are groups that support solar power from across the political spectrum, from free-market conservatives to people of faith who want to care for God's creation to advocates for solutions to climate change to deep-green environmentalists. You'll probably fall somewhere in between, which is even better news, since most groups out there these days fall in the middle too. The next chapter will help you find a group that supports solar power that will appeal to you.



## FROM THE REVOLUTION: WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE

The American Revolution almost ended in failure at several times, but one of the worst was just a few months after the Declaration of Independence was signed. In the summer and fall of 1776, the British beat the Americans in one battle after another. After taking New York City and routing the Americans on Long Island and around the area, the British pursued Washington's army into New Jersey, forcing him to retreat across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. American civilians started to lose confidence in the patriot cause. Farmers and townspeople alike stopped providing food and shelter to the Continental Army even as an especially cold winter came on.

To save the patriot cause, General George Washington knew he needed a victory on the battlefield. And he was willing to try something desperate to get one. Normally, armies at the time took a break from fighting during the winter. Following this custom, the British and their Hessian allies were preparing to hunker down in their tents and warm themselves around campfires, waiting for the spring to resume fighting. But Washington wasn't willing to wait for the spring.

He decided to attack the New Jersey town of Trenton, occupied by Hessian troops during the winter. To increase

his chance of success, Washington planned his attack for the early morning hours of December 26, hoping the Hessians would be sleeping off their Christmas celebrations from the night before. To get to Trenton from his base in Pennsylvania, Washington had to ferry his troops across the Delaware River—in the middle of an especially strong snowstorm. Despite wind, cold, and damp, Washington managed to get 2,400 soldiers and 18 cannons across the river for the early morning attack.

When the Americans arrived in Trenton, it turned out that the Hessians weren't hung over. But they were complacent and unprepared, having called off their night patrols because of the snowstorm. They never bothered to build trenches either, thinking that the Americans were just country clowns who could easily be beaten with bayonets.

As it turned out, the Americans won the day, killing and wounding about 100 Hessians, mortally wounding Hessian commander Johann Rall, and capturing nearly 1,000 others, but losing only seven Americans in the battle. The victory was just what Washington and the patriot cause needed, reigniting support for the rebellion. New soldiers volunteered and farmers started providing food and shelter once again for the Continental troops.

Crossing the Delaware to attack Trenton was a bold and risky move by Washington. But given low public support for his war effort, he knew he had little to lose. Today's solar patriots are in a better position. First, today we

know that the public is on our side and that solar is by far America's most popular energy source. Second, we know that we will eventually win and that since its fuel is free and nonpolluting, solar certainly will become America's preferred energy source. It's just a question of when and how that will happen.

The longer the United States waits to get serious about solar, the harder it will be to catch up to other countries and to fight climate change. And if monopoly utilities succeed in locking out most rooftop solar in the future—making the rules favor large solar arrays run by utilities themselves—then our electrical grid will remain vulnerable and inefficient.

That's why rooftop solar advocates need to risk the big battles, just as Washington did when he crossed the Delaware. We should not settle for small gains like keeping net metering in our state. Instead, solar patriots should insist on citizens enjoying full rights to use, share, and sell solar power at fair market value. And we should insist on a national energy marketplace that makes fossil fuels pay their full costs. Only then will solar be as affordable as a clean energy source with no fuel cost and little pollution should be.

# Ten

## HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT GROUP FOR YOU

*The good men may do separately is small  
compared with what they may do collectively.*

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

**J**oining a group, even if it's only remotely via the Internet, is the best way to push for government rules and laws that will help solar power. You'll find two types of groups that support solar policy changes:

- Solar-only groups
- Groups that include solar as one of several issues

Depending on your interests and where you live, one or both types of groups may interest you.