



## Energy Activism in Arlington and Alexandria

By Rick Keller

The Sierra Club's national [Ready for 100](#) campaign has some strong local momentum. The Mount Vernon Group and other local environmental activists are working with local governments in Arlington and Alexandria, with the goal of having each jurisdiction commit to transitioning to 100% renewable energy for electricity by 2035 and all sectors (including transportation) by 2050, for the entire community.

The definition of renewable energy is energy that is naturally produced using sustainable sources that are not exhausted by their use in energy production--such as wind, solar, hydro, tidal, and geothermal--and do not produce carbon or other pollutants as emissions during the energy production process.

Energy efficiency is an important element in achieving our renewable energy goal, since less energy will need to be produced (supply) if less energy is required (demand).

A recent change in Sierra Club staff support for the campaign has allowed local volunteer teams to take a step back and examine next steps in the process. The Alexandria volunteers have begun working on a campaign aimed at achieving policy changes in their city; Alexandria is updating its [Eco-City](#) commitment over the next two years and so the focus will be on adoption of new targets for energy usage, including the energy requirements of city buildings, by the City Council.

Arlington volunteers are focused on citizen education, engaging civic associations and creating a school-community renewable energy initiative. There will also be work to strengthen the renewable energy element of Arlington's [Community Energy Plan](#) which is scheduled for an update in 2018.

Arlington and Alexandria are at different points in their journeys toward 100% renewable energy. Both have building incentive programs for developers to retain affordable housing, but Arlington's is more advanced as it includes a [green building incentive program](#) that can yield additional density to a developer as a reward for building a more sustainable structure. Of greater importance to our renewable energy initiative is Arlington's movement toward net zero buildings. Arlington Public Schools has one, [Discovery Elementary](#), and construction has begun on a second elementary school located on the TJ Middle School grounds that will be built net-zero ready. Why net-zero "ready" and not just net zero? It is because that while the

cost of the seventy-two geothermal “wells” is include in the construction cost, the solar panels are not. The building will have the infrastructure to utilize solar panels, so it will be ready.

Where will solar come from? Possibly from a third-party company that will install and own the solar panels on the school and sell the power to the school system. In this scenario, APS would pay the owner of the panels instead of Dominion (unless Dominion offers the school system a public-private partnership agreement, or PPA). This is possible because in June 2017 the Arlington School Board adopted an amendment to their procurement rules to allow for PPAs. The amendment was required under Virginia code. Arlington Public Schools are now able to arrange for solar at the planned new school and to request bids for solar on all its other facilities.

On the Arlington County side, the procurement amendment that would allow for PPAs for solar on county buildings (yes, Virginia – school districts and their county governments often operate under different rules) has not yet been adopted. However, that has not stopped the design of a new net-zero community center at Lubber Run, and the cost factor between net zero and standard heating/cooling/electrical system for the size of the facility are basically the same.

There is an additional benefit to Arlington Public Schools’ PPA amendment: it paves the way for other school systems to do the same. The legal work and procurement language has been done by APS and can be adapted by other districts also interested in renewable energy. Adopting the amendment costs a school system nothing. It does open the door to possible energy cost savings and cost certainty – not to mention setting an example for our children to show we can take actions that will benefit our environment and help begin the work to mitigate climate change.

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