The governor should rethink his solar proposal

M. Granger Morgan's Sunday Forum piece ("Don't Oversell Solar: It Will Be Too Costly to Provide Bulk Power for Years to Come," Sept. 12) was based on research Dr. Morgan (a member of the National Academy of Sciences) and co-authors published in one of the most prestigious peer-reviewed environmental journals. That research showed that the cutting-edge scientists and engineers actually making the best solar photovoltaic cells do not foresee that costs will become competitive with other low-carbon power in my lifetime.

Let's look at real-world numbers. The 15 megawatt East Dunmore Township solar farm near Lancaster will cost $65 million, according to a Sept. 1 Lancaster Intelligencer Journal article. That works out to $4.33 per watt produced at noon in midsummer. Suppose that the developer can borrow money at only 5 percent interest, and that the array will perform at full power for 25 years. In Pennsylvania, that array will produce power at an average yearly cost without subsidies of 32 cents per kilowatt-hour (kWh), more than five times what conventional power costs. Wind power in Pennsylvania costs no more than 11 cents per kWh (and often less) without counting subsidies.

That means that a law requiring that 1 percent of the 150 billion kWh sold in Pennsylvania each year come from solar power would cost Pennsylvania ratepayers over $300 million each year above the cost of wind power!

In a state where everyone from factory workers to municipal workers is struggling, that's simply too much. Why, we can't even agree on a severance tax for natural gas that would raise $100 million.

The governor has had some excellent ideas, but this one should be re-thought.

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