

COMMENTARY

There's a role for natural gas in the renewable-energy future

By Gavin Donohue

New York is in the middle of an energy revolution. As we look to build back better in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the energy industry is poised to serve as an economic engine to lead us on the road to recovery and build the green economy.

And as we move down that path, power producers that have energized our state, employed our neighbors and provided tax revenue to our communities are carving out their place. Highly efficient natural gas facilities are instrumental in propelling us to the renewable-energy future we all want, and they play a critical role in their communities, providing essential jobs and tax revenues — especially important as we grapple with the economic impacts of COVID-19.

The past year has emphasized the need for a reliable electric system, and reliability has never been in question during this pandemic. That's a credit to our system that has natural gas as a backbone. Hospitals, grocery stores, virtual classrooms — even just binge-watching Netflix — all depend on reliable electricity. This is not a question of renewables vs. natural gas; guaranteeing reliability means ensuring resources are available when needed to meet demand.

Building the electric grid of the future is a process, and it's happening around the state. In the Hudson Valley, natural gas facilities like the CPV Valley Energy Center and Cricket Valley Energy Center, along with the proposed upgrades to the Danskammer Energy Center, are smart investments that replace higher-emitting generation while providing a necessary backup to the grid.

Looking upstate, Greenidge Generation is a model for innovation. In 2017, it converted from coal to natural gas — a much cleaner, considerably more efficient fuel that complements renewable energy when the sun does not shine and the wind does not blow. Three years later, Greenidge launched a data mining operation that includes cryptocurrency to support its operation and its community while continuing to provide power to the grid. The new data center has demonstrated to other generators the possibilities that exist for them in the 21st-century economy.

Around the state, we know all too well that for families and communities, the economic ramifications of the pandemic are wide-ranging, and it will take time to recover. In just one year, Greenidge's mining operation produced an additional \$300,000 in local tax revenue — a desperately needed boost for a local government budget devastated by COVID-19. As a result, Yates County was the only county among its neighbors to see sales tax growth in 2020. This facility is adding great, high-tech jobs in a cutting-edge field. It is even exploring options like battery storage that can help the plant continue growing and bring the state closer to its renewable energy goals.

Renewable projects are important, but they are intermittent by nature. If the sun isn't shining and the wind isn't blowing, natural gas generators can turn on and off quickly to back up the system. And those same generators, with future retrofits, may be able to run on clean fuels like hydrogen or renewable natural gas,

building on the power sector's proven track record of emissions reductions. In the last 20 years, the power sector has seen a 56 percent decrease in carbon dioxide emissions, along with reductions of 99 percent and 92 percent in sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, respectively.

Guaranteed efficiency, reliable service, and jobs and taxes for communities are all things we should not take for granted. As we progress to a renewable future, the smart innovations of natural gas facilities around our state are indispensable in helping us get there.

► *Gavin Donohue is the president and CEO of the Independent Power Producers of New York, an Albany-based trade association. He is also a member of the New York State Climate Action Council.*