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Duke's solar plan gains support

Charlotte Business Journal - by [John Downey](#) Senior staff writer

Duke Energy Carolinas is moving closer to launching a program to place solar-energy panels atop the homes and businesses of some of its customers.

Most of the environmental, business and governmental groups who've weighed in on the \$50 million proposal support the Duke initiative, though some have reservations about it.

But the only entity to ask N.C. regulators to nix the solar program is **Wal-Mart Stores Inc.** In a recent filing with the **N.C. Utilities Commission**, the discount-retail giant says Duke's plan could hamper private solar-power development in the utility's service area.

Duke proposed the program in June. The company would own and operate solar panels built on customers' property.

The customers would be paid rent for Duke's use of their property, but they would not be able to use any of the power produced by the panels. Instead, all the power — generated at hundreds of sites — would be owned by Duke. The Charlotte-based utility would dispatch the power for sale on its system, just as electricity is distributed from a large power plant.

Duke originally proposed spending \$100 million to build 20 megawatts of solar capacity. The company then scaled down the program to \$50 million and 10 megawatts in an effort to address the concerns of the state commission's public staff, which represents the interests of consumers on utility matters.

Duke says the rooftop solar program will help it meet the state's new requirements for renewable-energy production.

Among the responses filed last week by interested parties:

- The **Southern Alliance for Clean Energy**, an environmental group, proposes that regulators allow Duke the option of building the program to the original 20 megawatts.
- The **Solar Alliance** and the **Vote Solar Initiative** — two solar-energy industry groups — suggest limiting Duke's program to five megawatts, and then have Duke issue a request for proposals from private developers for the other five megawatts.
- The **N.C. Sustainable Energy Association**, which also has industry ties, disputes whether Duke's program counts as the kind of private investment the state General Assembly intended to foster with its renewable-energy legislation last year. The association supports approval of Duke's program. But it asks that the commission carve out some solar-power production for private companies.
- The public staff and the N.C. attorney general's office propose approving Duke's program with a few conditions.

These particular regulatory filings are generally the final step before the commission rules on such requests. Still, the commission may not decide on approving Duke's plan until early next year.

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