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Now is the time to expand the state's ability to create clean energy jobs - by Lou Antonellis and Kristen Gowin

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to see our world in a new perspective, reminding us that our planet is smaller than we think, and that the effects of events anywhere ripple in real and tangible ways worldwide. Our connectedness goes far beyond the reach of coronavirus; we share a global economy and a common ecosystem.

As our communities seek to rebuild our economy after the pandemic, we all agree that we need to rebuild in new, and better ways. Now is our chance to prioritize green energy solutions that also produce good, family-sustaining union jobs.

That's why electrical workers and contractors among others are joining together to advocate for the expansion of an innovative program in Massachusetts that helps to finance energy improvements, such as energy-efficient projects, on commercial and industrial properties in Massachusetts. Right now, this progressive financing is only accessible to existing buildings, but we believe the legislature should act to make it available to new structures where commitments are made to environmentally friendly upgrades, as well.

The program that many are calling to expand, the Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE), incentivizes commercial and industrial property owners and developers to incorporate clean energy improvements. In doing so, these owners and developers create jobs, reduce carbon emissions, and alleviate pressure from the grid, lowering energy costs for everyday consumers.

PACE financing mitigates the biggest barrier for retroactive energy initiatives: the cost to make the upgrades. There are limited mechanisms in Massachusetts for financing energy improvements such as energy-efficiency projects, renewables, and gas line extensions on commercial and industrial properties. Those opportunities shrink further when factoring in the devastation to our economy following the coronavirus global pandemic.

PACE enables owners to implement substantial energy upgrades by granting longer payback periods of up to 20 years. To participate, a property owner agrees to a betterment assessment and lien on their property, which in turn repays the financing. [1]Most importantly, PACE does not require any public funds, as the funding comes from commercial developers, private lenders and financiers. It's a win-win-win for businesses, workers, and taxpayers.

In 22 states plus Washington, D.C., legislators already enabled PACE for new construction projects, precisely because it is effective in encouraging green energy projects, and the corresponding economic stimulus and workforce development that benefits local communities.

The timing could not be more urgent to create the job opportunities which would result from the new, green energy construction projects incentivized by PACE financing. We applaud and thank the Massachusetts legislators who have been supportive of this expansion to benefit both workers and the environment, and we continue to work productively with both the Massachusetts House and the Massachusetts Senate to advocate for its passage.

COVID-19 has gutted workforces across this country, including here in Massachusetts, where our elected officials took great care to keep the community safe and slow the spread of the virus through robust public health efforts. The Bureau of Labor statistics reported this week that Massachusetts has the highest rate of unemployment in the country, at a whopping 17.4%. [2]

The current MA unemployment rate tops the nation's peak for the duration of the pandemic in April, when nearly 15% of the population filed for unemployment. (During the Great Recession, at its peak in October 2009, unemployment reached just 10%.) [3]

In light of the economic difficulties we are facing as a state, the need to open additional sources of investment for our communities is paramount. That need could be addressed, in part, by the PACE financing program, which helps to create construction jobs nationwide. Expanding PACE financing in Massachusetts to include new construction projects will exponentially increase the capacity in which the Commonwealth, and local families, can benefit from the program in the wake of COVID-19.

There are already new construction projects in the works that will benefit immediately from PACE program expansion, like a \$27 million commercial office project on Charles Street in downtown Malden that will result in new jobs for local families and economic stimulus for the community.

Even as our attention is pulled to addressing the emergent needs we face in a post-COVID world, the stark reality of climate change has not disappeared, and sustainable building contributes to a better world for us all.

We must be doing everything we can to make a green future a top priority at the start of construction, not just in hindsight. Leveraging the PACE program will not only help lead our community into the clean energy future we need, but it will also help more urgently stabilize some of the job losses we face today by stimulating smart development, and creating more good, union jobs in our communities.

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[1] <https://www.massdevelopment.com/what-we-offer/key-initiatives/pace/>

[2]

<https://boston.cbslocal.com/2020/07/17/massachusetts-unemployment-rate-june-highest-country-coronavirus/#:~:text=The%20federal%20Bureau%20of%20Labor,release%20from%20the%20Bureau%20states.>

[3] <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost?bls>

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