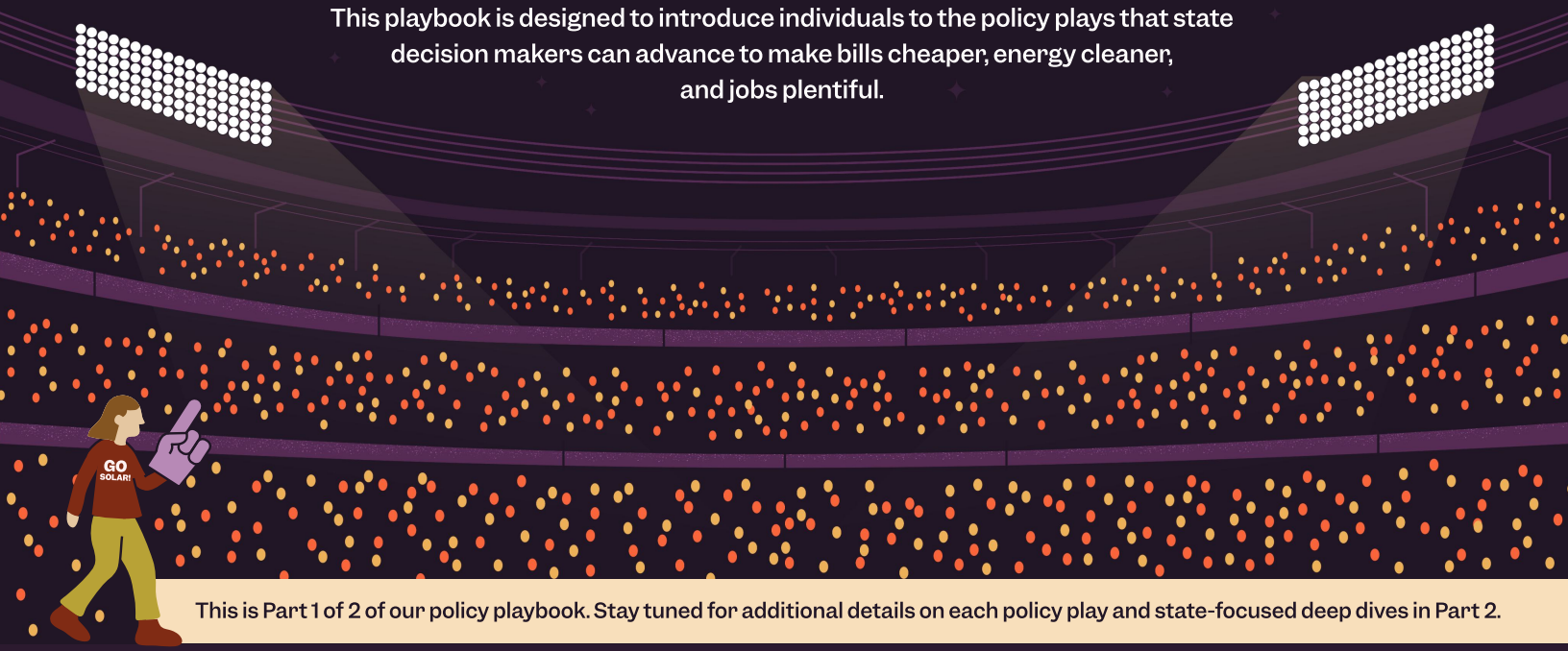
VOTE SOLAR

The Energy Ground Game:
Making Energy Affordable with Community Power



It's game time. Crowds are watching. There's a blue wave in the stadium. People are demanding action and decision makers are feeling the pressure to deliver. States have tremendous power to make a change that improves people's lives. Energy affordability is on center field, and the clock has started – this playbook can help leaders make progress. Now is the time for a strong ground game powered by communities to open up room for big moves. This playbook is designed to introduce individuals to the policy plays that state decision makers can advance to make bills cheaper, energy cleaner, and jobs plentiful.



This is Part 1 of 2 of our policy playbook. Stay tuned for additional details on each policy play and state-focused deep dives in Part 2.

Energy bills are already unaffordable and they will get worse if action is not taken. Governors and elected officials face real pressure to balance the strain on people's pocketbooks with new state investment and economic growth, increasingly tied to data center development. During the 2026 elections, voters in the most competitive regions listed energy affordability issues - gas prices and utility bills - as two of their top three priorities for voting (Hart Research). Public utility commissioners, individuals who regulate state investor owned utilities, have a critical role. These bodies are responsible for holding utilities accountable to keep the lights on, make bills more affordable, and protect the public interest. The question is whether states can meet growing demand without saddling households and communities with unnecessary costs.

That question is urgent. **Household energy bills have risen faster than inflation since 2022, placing financial strain on 1 in 6 households. People are choosing between paying their energy bills or buying medicine.** As electricity demand surges, reliability and affordability must go hand in hand.

Growing demand isn't the only driver of rising bills. More than 30% of household electric bills go toward the poles, wires, and other infrastructure needed to deliver electricity. Meanwhile, utilities are proposing costly new power plants to serve anticipated data center growth—before it's clear how many of those data centers will come online. Building expensive, polluting infrastructure to meet speculative demand risks locking households into higher costs for decades.

Local solar and storage are essential to a more affordable, reliable energy system. Costs need to come down. **It is time to unlock the cheapest, quickest to deploy resources in a way that reduces costs for everyone.** This can be done by generating power close to where it's used and coordinating flexible community power networks (or Virtual Power Plants), states can meet growing demand, strengthen reliability, and make better use of existing grid infrastructure. Regulators must hold utilities accountable for deploying these faster, lower-cost alternatives rather than defaulting to expensive infrastructure expansion. A block-and-tackle approach to modernizing our electricity system can deliver a grid that works better and costs less for everyone.

The goal isn't just to build more power. It's to deliver reliable, affordable electricity by making the most of the resources we already have—and holding utilities accountable for getting it right.

Key players:

Utilities should treat local solar and storage as resources in their planning, making smarter use of the resources and the grid we already have. They should be required to demonstrate that new investments are necessary, cost-effective, and in the public interest—not simply default to building more. And they should ensure large load customers, like data centers, pay their fair share and bring new clean energy online.

Governors must make local solar and storage a foundational energy source to address the affordability crisis. Whether through individual appointments of commission members or other key energy staff, Executive Orders, or forcing data centers to pay their fair share - their vision turned to action changes the game.

State lawmakers have a tremendous opportunity to drive bold, ambitious clean energy legislation that benefits and protects households across their state - especially the most vulnerable - from rising energy bills.

State utility regulators must make sure utilities are playing a fair game, and keep the interests of individuals front and center rather than wealthy corporations.

And most importantly, the people. Communities have the power to hold these players accountable, and to demand fair rules across our energy system.

The Playbook

▶ Addressing this challenge requires bold vision and transformative leadership to achieve three essential outcomes:



❶ Flexible Energy

Powering a growing economy by prioritizing speed to power through the expansion of local solar and storage to scale clean capacity quickly and offer the flexibility required to meet rising energy demand.



❷ Reliable Energy

Modernizing the grid to be dynamic, distributed, and resilient in the face of climate and demand pressures.



❸ Affordable Energy

Lowering bills now and over the long term by deploying proven clean energy solutions with measurable benefits for ratepayers.

These outcomes can be achieved through three strategies: Build, Integrate, and Accelerate.

Build: expands markets and opportunities for local solar and storage.

Integrate: makes local solar and storage an essential part of grid planning and operations.

Accelerate: shifts utility incentives, builds public and political support, and ensures the benefits of clean energy reach all ratepayers.

On one hand, federal debates over clean energy have become increasingly polarized. And on the other hand, state-level policy and regulation has the opportunity to address everyday needs of the citizens who expect the lights to stay on affordably and reliably. This can and should be done by reducing unnecessary infrastructure spending, improving utility planning, and expanding access to local solar with measurable savings for all ratepayers.

Flexibility, reliability, and affordability are not separate goals; they reinforce one another. A grid built around local solar and storage meets rising demand and strengthens reliability and lowers costs, which is exactly why these three pillars anchor everything that follows.

Smart policy plays like accelerating local solar and storage, improving grid planning, and holding utilities accountable to being a good team player are an opportunity to **save $600 billion by 2050 and cut roughly half of the projected increase in average household electricity bills, adjusted for inflation, by 2035** (The Brattle Group).

These key plays don't require choosing between affordability and economic growth. They provide a unified playbook for state-level policy and regulatory improvements to meet rising electricity demand, make better use of the grid, and prioritize energy affordability.

Activate Local Solar Solutions as a Tool for Affordability, Reliability, and Growing Energy Demand

The U.S. faces an unprecedented surge in electricity demand. Peak demand is projected to increase by 24% by 2030 and 36% by 2035 (Brattle Group), driven largely by data centers, electrification, and industrial growth. Utilities are using projected demand to justify extending the life of existing coal plants and building new fossil gas infrastructure, with investor-owned utilities anticipating more than $1.1 trillion in investments between 2025 and 2029 (Edison Electric Institute). Unless we change the rules in the game, families and businesses will shoulder the costs of potentially unnecessary investments for decades. States have an opportunity to change course by prioritizing local solar and storage—among the fastest and most economical resources to deploy—to meet growing demand while avoiding costly fossil fuel investments.

KEY PLAYS

Protect households from rising load growth with affordable, reliable, and community-centered energy solutions.



Make Big Energy Users Pull Their Weight, So Households Don't Carry the Team

The Policy Play: Advance a data center accountability framework, including:

- Strong rules requiring large-scale energy consumers (e.g., data center hyperscalers) to pay for necessary upgrades so families do not bear the cost of infrastructure.
- Bring new clean energy energy or capacity (BYONCE policy).
- Participate in flexible load management.
- Invest in local solar and storage through direct procurement or community power programs.
- Deliver meaningful community benefits.

Economic Impact: Explosive data center demand raised wholesale electricity prices by 6.9% in 2025, with price increases reaching as much as 15% in places like Northern Virginia and the Pacific Northwest (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas).



Community Power Networks: Individual Players, Working Together as a Team

The Policy Play: These networks, often referred to as Virtual Power Plants, coordinate local resources — including rooftop solar, home batteries, smart thermostats, and mid-sized community installations—to work together to provide electricity when and where communities need it most.

- Standardize compensation rules for aggregated battery & solar networks.
- Ensure all distributed, local, clean energy resources can participate.

Economic Impact: Community power networks, called Virtual Power Plants by experts, can offset up to 14% of U.S. peak electricity demand by 2050 (RMI) at **40% to 60% lower cost** than traditional gas peaker plants (The Brattle Group).

Maximize Local Solar Savings for All Ratepayers

The combined impacts of climate change and growing energy demand are taking a toll on our ability to keep the lights on. The North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) reports that more than half of North America faces a risk of energy shortfalls in the next five to ten years (NERC). By harnessing power from rooftops and communities, and targeting medium-sized solar and storage to areas of particular energy system need, we can quickly bolster energy supply, improve grid stability, and reduce costs.

Local solar and storage resources should be integrated into utility planning and grid operations so they are recognized as essential components of a modern, resilient electric system. New large loads coming online cannot drive the expansion of new gas plants without considering cheaper, cleaner alternatives.

KEY PLAYS

Ensure the clean energy transition delivers benefits to everyone by reforming utility incentives and resource planning processes.



Put Local Power in the Starting Lineup: Local Solar and Storage in Resource Planning

The Policy Play: Reform how utilities conduct planning processes so that local solar and storage is identified, fairly valued, and selected as cost-effective alternatives to conventional (fossil fuel, poles and wires, and other costs that individuals pay for on their electric bill) utility investments. In order to maximize the value of local solar and storage, deployment can be targeted at areas on the grid where there is the greatest need.

Economic Impact: Recent modeling in New Mexico's Integrated Resource Planning process found that high rates of local solar, storage, demand response and community power networks (also called Virtual Power Plants) would deliver $333 million in net present savings (PNM).



Flag on the Play: Stop Rewarding Spending Over Results

The Policy Play: Advance **Performance Based Regulation (PBR)** to reward better grid utilization, increase reliability, and more affordable energy outcomes to all ratepayers, with profit opportunities and allowable expenses evaluated against those results rather than guaranteed returns on infrastructure spending.

Economic Impact: On average, the U.S. only uses about half of our electrical grid. In other words, we've built a system large enough to handle our busiest moments, even though we spend most of the year using much less of it. And while billions of dollars in power plants, poles, wires, and other infrastructure sit underused for much of the year—communities are footing the bill for more and more of those investments. We don't just pay for the electricity we use. We also pay for a massive system built to be ready for the electricity we might need during a relatively small number of peak moments. Better use of the grid has real financial impacts on our pocketbooks and is **projected to save Americans $110–$170 billion on electricity bills over the next decade** (The Brattle Group).

Deploy Local Solar Rapidly and Affordably at Scale

Energy affordability is a growing national issue, with electricity rates projected to rise faster than at any time in recent history (Center for American Progress). This is particularly alarming as electric rates have already risen by 29% over the past four years as compared to 20% inflation (Power Lines). Left unaddressed, rising rates will exacerbate economic hardship and make bold progress on climate goals challenging, as households approach energy decisions from a place of fear, with a sole focus on costs. Rather than accepting rising costs as inevitable, policies should be advanced that put downward pressure on bills by deploying proven clean energy solutions more quickly and efficiently.

KEY PLAYS

Catalyze rapid, affordable deployment of local solar and storage at scale – with targeted deployment for the most vulnerable communities – by reducing costs and opening new pathways for solar.



Put the Whole Roster to Work: Expand Access with Community Solar and Storage and Plug-in Solar

The Policy Play: Individuals without the ability to otherwise go solar are able to obtain energy savings through community solar programs and plug-in solar systems, with a particular focus on low wealth households and frontline communities.

Economic Impact: Approximately 70% of households are locked out of traditional rooftop solar due to renting, roof constraints, or upfront expense (Bright Saver). Both plug-in solar and community solar provide essential, affordable solutions to help individuals gain control over skyrocketing costs.



Clear the Path to the End Zone: Block the Bureaucracy with Streamlined Permitting and Interconnection Reforms

The Policy Play: Advancing streamlined permitting and interconnection policies, and updated rules, to eliminate unnecessary costs and installation timelines. Existing, free platforms like SolarAPP+ provide pre-built pathways so local governments can skip building custom systems from scratch. Interconnection reforms, such as flexible interconnection, help new energy resources connect to the grid faster and at lower cost by making better use of existing power lines - essentially helping the grid operate more smoothly.

Economic Impact: There are over 40,000 local permitting offices across the country, each able to set their own rules, fees and process for permitting solar. States that adopt streamlined permitting mean projects are approved 14.5 business days earlier, statewide households increase solar adoption by up to 17%, and upfront installation costs are cut by up to 13% (National Renewable Energy Laboratory). Interconnection reforms are simple, high-impact, solutions with tremendous value – **projected to save households $39 billion by 2050** (The Brattle Group).

Building on a Winning Mindset: Real-World Policy & Regulatory Victories

State policy innovations demonstrate that integrating local solar and storage into utility planning delivers immediate consumer savings and grid reliability. Proven wins include:



Illinois
(Clean & Reliable Grid Affordability Act):

- Mandates 1.8 GW of Community Power Networks by 2030, 3 GW of battery storage, and a dedicated "Storage for All" program.
- Projected to save the average household $10.59 per month by 2030 and **$20.54 per month by 2035**.



Michigan
(Valuing DERs as Selectable Resources):

- Mandated that utilities evaluate community power alongside traditional fossil plants as a formal supply-side option in Integrated Resource Plans (IRPs), proving local resource options can compete head-to-head on cost



Minnesota
(Unlocking Private Capital for Grid Capacity):

- Mandated evaluation of local resource benefits in utility planning, resulting in Xcel Energy's Capacity Connect program—which secured a **$50 million investment from Google** to deploy over 200 MW of distributed battery storage.



Utah
(Bipartisan Plug-In Solar Legislation):

- Enacted budget-neutral plug-in solar policies with unanimous bipartisan support, paving the way for rapid consumer adoption.

VOTE SOLAR

Our Mission

Our mission is to realize a 100% clean energy future through a solutions-driven, people-first approach.

Our Vision

We are working for a 100% clean powered future that supports the needs, health and well-being of everyone in the U.S. — with solar energy leading the way.

We focus on solar energy because it's plentiful, it's popular, and it has a unique ability to shift power (literally and figuratively) over energy decision-making to real people, who overwhelmingly support a rapid transition to clean energy.

Founded in 2002, Vote Solar advocates for clean energy in legislative and regulatory arenas at the state level, where most decisions about electricity are made. Despite powerful opposition, we use a winning combination of deep policy expertise, coalition building, and public engagement to get the job done.

Vote Solar's Unique Role

We are building a common-sense pathway to affordable and reliable energy for every American household.

Regulatory Experts

Most grid decisions happen in Public Utility Commissions. Our staff provides the data and expert testimony needed to win these complex cases.

Movement Connectors

We provide the technical resources and legal support that local community groups need to have a real seat at the table.

Implementation Specialists

We stay in the trenches after a bill passes, working with state agencies to ensure that technical rules are designed correctly so that families actually see the savings.