Focus on Georgia's Energy Future: Climate Solutions That Go Beyond Carbon

Summary

The Georgia Power Integrated Resource Plan and its follow-on rate case shape the pathway for scaling many of Drawdown Georgia's climate solutions, from large-scale solar to energy efficiency to EV charging infrastructure. In this follow-up webinar, host Blair Beasley of the Ray C. Anderson Foundation brings together four experts, Kevin Kelly of Southface Institute, Jill Kysor of the Southern Environmental Law Center, Brionté McCorkle of Georgia Conservation Voters, and Alicia Brown of the City of Savannah, to unpack what was at stake in the completed 2022 IRP and rate case, and what happened.

Key Takeaways

● The 2022 IRP added 2,300 megawatts of new renewable energy capacity, mostly large-scale solar, and approved 500 megawatts of new battery storage, building on Georgia's position as seventh nationally for total solar installed.

● Advocates pushed to expand Georgia Power's capped 5,000-customer net metering program, but the Public Service Commission declined, instead raising the export compensation rate for rooftop solar customers from about 2.5 cents to 6.8 cents per kilowatt-hour.

● The Commission approved a 15% increase to Georgia Power's energy efficiency savings goals, short of what advocates wanted, and reversed a 2019 decision that had made an expensive demand charge tariff the default rate for new residential customers.

● Brionté McCorkle detailed a successful voting rights lawsuit challenging the PSC's statewide election structure, which a judge found diluted the votes of Georgia's most energy-burdened, majority-Black district, along with the Commission's efforts to limit public participation during the 2022 rate case.

● For the first time, five local governments, including the City of Savannah, Atlanta, Decatur, DeKalb County, and Athens-Clarke County, intervened together in the IRP as the Georgia Coalition of Local Governments, pushing for expanded net metering, community solar, and energy efficiency access for their most energy-burdened residents.

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Blair Beasley: All right, well, welcome everyone to the latest Drawdown Georgia webinar in our series, Climate Solutions That Go Beyond Carbon. My name is Blair Beasley, and I'm the director of climate strategies at the Ray C. Anderson Foundation. We've been proud to support Drawdown Georgia and its efforts to grow high-impact climate solutions in our state.

I'm excited for this discussion today and our all-star panel of speakers. This is actually a follow-up conversation to a webinar we hosted in late 2021. Back then, we were previewing and setting the stage for the 2022 Integrated Resource Planning process for Georgia Power. That IRP cycle is now complete, so we're back to discuss both what was at stake, and, importantly, what happened.

The research underpinning Drawdown Georgia identified 20 high-impact solutions for our state that, if scaled to ambitious but achievable levels, could collectively cut Georgia's greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030, compared to 2005 levels. The pathway for growing many of these solutions runs in part through the IRP process and decisions made at the Georgia Public Service Commission. And as we'll talk about today, how climate solutions expand in our state will impact Georgia's carbon footprint, as well as the communities and individuals who live here.

A few quick programming notes before we dive in: I'm going to briefly introduce our panel, and following their presentations, we'll open it up for audience Q&A. Please add your questions to the Q&A chat box, and I'll do my best to get to as many as possible.

Now for our speakers. First, we'll hear from Kevin Kelly, an independent policy advisor to Southface Institute and a principal with Kirkwood and Kelly Consulting. Then we'll hear from Jill Kysor, senior attorney and leader of the Solar Initiative at the Southern Environmental Law Center. Next, we'll hear from Brionté McCorkle, executive director of Georgia Conservation Voters. And finally, we'll hear from Alicia Brown, clean energy program manager with the City of Savannah's Office of Sustainability.

As I said, this is a really exciting group. So with that, Kevin, I'll turn the mic over to you to kick off our program.

Kevin Kelly: Thank you, Blair. Good morning, everyone. My goal today is to set the stage a little and talk about what the IRP and the rate case are, and how those two processes fit together.

2022 was a very big year for electricity regulation at the Georgia Public Service Commission, which I'll call the PSC throughout the rest of my presentation. The year opened with the 2022 Integrated Resource Plan, which I'll refer to as the IRP going forward, running from January to July. You can think of the IRP as determining what the plan is for the utility. Then the 2022 rate case followed right on the heels of the IRP, starting in July and ending in December, and you can think of that as determining how to pay for the plan. First you come up with the plan, then you figure out how to pay for it. By statute, the IRP happens every three years, and the current approach in Georgia has generally been to have a rate case every three years immediately following the IRP. That's practice, not a legal requirement, and we can pick that up in Q&A if anyone's curious.

So what is the IRP? In simplest terms, it's a 20-year plan. The IRP must contain the utility's electric demand and energy forecast for its service territory for at least a 20-year period, and then describe the utility's program for meeting that forecast in an economical and reliable manner. One way to think about it is through the questions the IRP tries to answer: What plants will the utility decommission, and when? What size and type of plants will it build, and when? What agreements does the utility need for new long-term power purchases? What transmission improvements and expansions are needed to maintain reliable service, an increasingly critical issue in the IRP? And then, what are the benefits of adding renewable energy resources to the system, and how would energy efficiency, often called demand-side management in regulatory circles, help lessen the forecasted load and benefit customers?

Briefly, on the origins of the process: the IRP came into being with the IRP Act of 1991, growing in part out of a past problem where the PSC would have to rule on utility investments after the fact. Now the IRP sets the plan first, so the utility is never coming before the commission asking to recover costs that haven't already been approved in the planning process.

Several Drawdown Georgia solutions got addressed in the 2022 IRP, and I'll touch on them lightly since others will speak to them in more depth. On large-scale solar, since 2013 the IRP has included approval of large solar energy procurement by Georgia Power, and since 2019 it's also included approval of large solar subscription programs, where large customers can buy solar through the utility. I think it's important to underscore that these programs are really the single largest driver of new utility-scale solar development in the state. The IRP also addresses demand response and energy efficiency, included in Georgia Power's overall demand-side management plan. Rooftop solar got discussed a lot in the 2022 IRP, but the core issue ultimately got deferred to the rate case, which I'll talk about in a minute, though there were some ancillary issues around the renewable cost-benefit framework and the valuation of distributed renewable resources on the system. And retrofitting buildings, of course, is addressed in Georgia Power's demand-side management plan as well.

Now, this is my attempt to explain the 2022 rate case, and rate cases in general, in one diagram, four key questions a rate case addresses. First: what are the revenue requirements, or the cost to serve customers, for the utility? How much revenue does Georgia Power need to cover its cost to serve customers and earn a reasonable return on its investment in the equipment it uses to do so? Buried in that, though I say "buried" loosely since it's really one of the key issues debated in a rate case, is the return on equity for the utility, the reasonable rate of return it should earn on its investment. That's determining the cost of service. Then, once you have a cost of service, how do you allocate those costs to customers? Utilities typically allocate buckets of cost to different classes of customers, since different customers use energy differently and cause costs on the system differently. That allocation flows into the actual rate tariffs. Finally, there's rate design: what are good rate designs for the various customer classes?

Those designs have to hit the revenue requirements for the utility, and also fit or give customers options depending on how they use electricity.

That's the technical description of what happens in a rate case. There were a few special issues that came up in the Georgia Power 2022 rate case worth mentioning. First is the net metering program, really a debate about the value of energy exported from behind-the-meter distributed renewable generation, think of a rooftop solar system exporting energy to the grid, and what the utility should pay for that. Others will talk more about that. Second, the electric vehicle charging infrastructure program: the PSC approved Georgia Power's investment in expanding EV charging infrastructure across the state. Third, residential rate design: there was a lot of debate about appropriate rate designs for residential customers, including whether demand rates are appropriate for them, and about promoting time-of-use rates and other modern rate designs. And finally, data access, whether customers can get the right level of granularity on their own electricity use data, so they can assess the best rate for themselves or evaluate installing solar. This is really about customers getting access to hourly electricity use data.

One theme woven throughout the proceeding was the rate impacts on the horizon, since parties were debating what would be approved in the 2022 rate case while mindful of an upcoming fuel case that will add to customers' bills, as well as the final approval of Vogtle costs.

Finally, a reminder that there are lots of ways for interested stakeholders to get involved with the Public Service Commission: you can follow the dockets online, since they're all posted on YouTube, making it easy to follow proceedings. There are opportunities to make public comment, in person at hearings and online. Meeting with commissioners directly is a good option too, since they're popularly elected constitutional officers, and anyone can set up a meeting. And finally, there's intervening in the docket, a more formal process of becoming a party to the case. While it may feel far away, all of this starts over again in January 2025 with the 2025 IRP.

I think that's it for me.

Blair Beasley: Great, thanks so much. Kevin, can you hear me? My computer wasn't cooperating.

Kevin Kelly: I can hear you fine.

Blair Beasley: Okay, great. Can you tell us a little about what's coming next? If people want to continue engaging with the Public Service Commission on these issues, what are their next opportunities?

Kevin Kelly: Sure, and I'll interpret that broadly. Coming up shortly is the fuel docket, since the PSC oversees the recovery of costs the utility incurs for fuel, things like natural gas, coal, and uranium, separately from a base rate proceeding. That will start in late February and run through about June, with final new rates effective in July. There are significant costs at play in the upcoming fuel cost recovery docket, since fuel costs have been rising and the utility is currently under-recovered in its fuel balance, so it's actually quite significant, perhaps even more so than the rate case. And then, toward the end of 2023, there will be a proceeding to determine the final cost recovery related to Vogtle Unit 4 and the broader Vogtle 3 and 4 project. Those are really the most important dockets on the near-term horizon.

Blair Beasley: Great, well, thank you so much, we really appreciate it. I'm going to turn the mic over to Jill Kysor next. Jill, you have the floor.

Jill Kysor: Thanks, Blair. Today I'm going to talk about how the Drawdown Georgia solutions fared in the 2022 Public Service Commission proceedings Kevin mentioned, the resource planning proceeding, or IRP, and the rate case. I'm going to focus on a few of the top 20 Drawdown solutions specifically: large-scale solar, which is listed as the number one Drawdown solution, rooftop solar, demand response, and retrofitting.

First, large-scale solar, and a little context. The 2022 IRP built on a lot of progress already made in Georgia. According to the Solar Energy Industries Association, Georgia ranks seventh nationally for total solar installed, and the state has more than 4,500 megawatts of solar already in the ground, enough to power about 525,000 homes. Most of that is large-scale, utility-scale development, much of it part of Georgia Power's portfolio. When Georgia Power filed its 2022 IRP last January, it said it would have nearly five gigawatts of solar and wind resources online by the end of 2024, and almost all of that, about 4,700 megawatts of solar, has been approved in these PSC dockets like the IRP proceeding, which is what makes these proceedings so important.

So what happened in 2022? In the IRP proceeding, the Commission ultimately approved 2,300 megawatts of new renewable energy resource capacity. Much of this, if not all, will likely be solar. About 2,100 megawatts of that will be large-scale solar installations, meaning greater than six megawatts in project size, and 200 megawatts will be new distributed generation renewable resources, though those projects can be up to six megawatts in size themselves. I know Drawdown Georgia draws its own line at five megawatts for large-scale solar, so most of that 2,300 megawatts of new capacity will likely be large-scale solar under that definition. There's also discussion in the Drawdown Georgia materials about how solar plus storage could increase reliability, and Georgia Power also came into this IRP with a request for new battery storage systems, paired with renewables or standalone. The PSC approved 500 megawatts of new storage capacity and provisionally approved a 265-megawatt storage project, so a lot of new storage coming online as well.

Kevin teed up that rooftop solar was a big issue in both proceedings, and I'm sure many of you have heard a bit about this fight in Georgia. In the IRP and the rate case, many advocates pushed for the expansion of Georgia Power's popular, 5,000-customer net metering program, created following the 2019 rate case. Georgia Power did not support expanding that program. Net metering effectively allows rooftop solar customers to use 100% of their homegrown energy, making rooftop solar much more affordable and financeable, and more accessible to everyday folks who might not be able to afford the upfront cost of going solar.

Ultimately, in the IRP proceeding, the Commission kicked the issue down the road to the rate case, and when we got there, the Commission declined to expand the net metering program, instead setting a new compensation rate. Before the new rate, Georgia Power was paying about 2.5 cents per kilowatt-hour for exported solar from rooftop customers. With the new rate in place for 2023, that export rate is about 6.8 cents per kilowatt-hour, roughly two and a half times higher. Time will tell whether that's enough to move the market, there wasn't really evidence about that in the case.

Another issue worth highlighting briefly is community solar. Georgia Power has had a community solar program in place for several years, priced as a premium product, meaning there's an added cost to participate, and it's been woefully undersubscribed, with a lot of open shares. Georgia Power proposed increasing the subscription price by several dollars from its already premium price, but several parties urged the Commission to instead lower it, and Commission staff even testified the price could be as low as $20 instead of $25 a share, while still allowing Georgia Power to recover its costs and giving customers a chance to save money, or at least achieve bill neutrality by participating. Ultimately, the Commission didn't adopt either proposal, and instead lowered the subscription price by a dollar, from $25 to $24 a month for residential customers.

On energy efficiency, which I'll sandwich in under retrofitting and demand response in the Drawdown Georgia solutions: in 2021, Georgia Power achieved about 0.4% savings through its energy efficiency, or demand-side management, portfolio, based on prior year sales, well below the national average. As an example, Duke Energy in North Carolina achieves about 1% savings, performing about two and a half times better. Georgia as a whole ranks about 39th, near the bottom, on ACEEE's energy efficiency scorecard, so this is definitely an area where we could stand to improve.

In the IRP proceeding, clean energy advocates pushed for increased investment in energy efficiency programs, arguing that ramping up investment was cost-effective and would also let Georgia Power avoid entering into some of the new gas capacity contracts it had proposed. Advocates specifically pushed for savings to ramp up to about 1% over a three-year period, more in line with Duke. The Commission ultimately voted to ramp up savings above what Georgia Power had proposed, though not as far as advocates pushed, approving a 15% increase in savings goals, similar to what it had done in 2019. So the company was pushed a bit beyond where it came in, but there's still a lot of room for improvement.

I also want to highlight a big rate design win from the 2022 rate case. In response to advocacy from Commission staff and a number of interveners, the Commission undid a 2019 decision that had made a complicated and expensive demand charge tariff the default rate for new residential premises, and also rejected Georgia Power's proposal to push new rooftop solar customers onto that same rate. Demand charges can hit customers with a big fee based on the single highest usage hour they have in a month, regardless of whether that hour coincides with a time when the system is stressed or other people are using a lot of energy, which makes them hard to predict and avoid, especially for residential customers who can't always avoid using multiple appliances at once. Demand charges can make it harder for customers to save money when they invest in energy efficiency or on-site solar, so even though this rate design win is a bit wonky and technical, I think it was a really big step forward in our 2022 advocacy.

In the 2022 IRP proceeding, Georgia Power had proposed two new demand response tariffs, and the Commission ultimately approved those, with the potential to bring up to 250 megawatts of new demand response capacity onto the system. And I want to highlight one more win: part of the 2022 IRP result will have Georgia Power file, in the next IRP, a scenario that allows demand response and energy efficiency to compete head-to-head with traditional supply-side resources. That's a really important step toward evaluating efficiency and demand response as resources in their own right, and letting them potentially fill needs moving forward.

I know that's a lot, and I didn't cover everything, so I'll kick it back to Blair and I'm happy to answer questions during Q&A.

Blair Beasley: Thanks, Jill. Quick follow-up: you mentioned a lot of different issues, and I imagine many people on this call care about several of them. If you had to pick a favorite, or an issue where you hope to see more engagement from the broader community, what would that be?

Jill Kysor: I'm rooting for energy efficiency. As I mentioned, Georgia has a lot of room for improvement here, a lot of untapped potential, and it's been a tough issue to get much attention around. I'm hoping that as a community, we can really mobilize around efficiency and get a lot more progress in the 2025 IRP.

Blair Beasley: Thanks, Jill. All right, Brionté, you're up, I'll turn the mic over to you.

Brionté McCorkle: I'm muted, can you all hear me now? Okay, great, wonderful. I'm Brionté McCorkle, executive director at Georgia Conservation Voters. For those unfamiliar, we work to advance climate and environmental justice, and to hold elected officials accountable for their actions and votes on the environment. We also have a sister organization, the GCV Education Fund, that organizes and mobilizes Georgians to advance climate and environmental justice.

I'm particularly passionate about environmental justice, which requires the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of people impacted by potentially harmful environmental decisions. If the people on the front lines are included meaningfully, theoretically the ultimate decision or policy takes their needs into consideration, and reflects a compromise that addresses those needs. That's actually what I studied, public policy, and it's meant to be a process where all stakeholders are brought in and given a real opportunity for input, input that helps shape fair and equitable policies for everyone involved.

Unfortunately, I learned very quickly that this isn't how things happen in real life. We've seen big business and corporate interests routinely outweigh the interests of the people most burdened by these decisions, and there are few examples more egregious than the Public Service Commission and its decisions to continually support Georgia Power's bottom line.

The first time I advocated before the PSC, I was surprised by the timing of the hearings, which occur during the typical 9-to-5 workday, so the room ends up very empty, save for a few interveners, PSC staff, the commissioners themselves, and Georgia Power employees. I was there because I care deeply about doing everything we can to mitigate further damage to our climate. Since we've largely missed the window to stop climate change outright, it's critical that we build communities that are resilient, and I'm keenly aware that the people on the front lines of climate change are mostly people of color and low-income people. They'll experience the impacts of a changing climate first, and are the least prepared to be resilient. So it's important that we take as much action as we can right now, and as one of the top carbon-emitting sectors in the U.S. and worldwide, adopting renewable and distributed energy is critical if we're going to adequately address climate and build a just, sustainable future.

I'm also personally invested in energy issues because many people in my family are energy burdened. My late grandmother told me many times growing up to turn off the lights, or we'd be sitting in the dark. At the time, I didn't understand she was talking about energy burden. Energy burden is the percent of median yearly income households pay for electricity and gas bills. Households nationally pay about 3% of their income on energy bills on average. A household paying more than 6% is considered to have a high energy burden, and one paying more than 10% is considered to have a severe energy burden. I have a map showing where in the state households face the greatest energy burden, above 10%, and I want you all to keep that map in mind, since it's relevant for the rest of my presentation.

In 2019, during an Integrated Resource Plan and the subsequent rate case, I joined a group of organizers to help people understand the fairly complicated, under-the-radar proceedings of the PSC. We worked with a group of volunteers, some young, some old, to come comment before the commissioners, asking for more renewable energy, more support for energy efficiency programming, and asking commissioners not to keep hiking rates and adding fees to power bills during the rate case. It felt like the commissioners were dismissive, in some cases even poking fun at people who were commenting, and it felt like our concerns were falling on deaf ears. So I requested a meeting with one commissioner in particular, to understand what we were missing, why Georgia Power was slow-walking progress on renewable energy, why there wasn't more support for energy efficiency, why the company kept raising bills so high when it was performing so well profit-wise.

At the time, that commissioner told me it was very difficult to push back against the power company, and that he'd learned incrementalism was the best approach. I disagreed strongly, and I'd encourage everyone to take a moment after this webinar to read Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail, where he specifically writes about the white moderate and the danger of incrementalism, especially for people being treated unjustly. I left that meeting feeling very patronized and frustrated, and later that year, the Commission approved a massive rate increase and added fees to bills for Georgia Power customers.

So I began looking at why the Commission was okay with raising bills on their constituents, and it led me to consider the makeup of the Commission and its election structure. Despite there being five districts, commissioners are elected statewide, and the Commission has been represented by nearly all white, Republican men for well over 100 years. This is a problem, because if you look at a map of the PSC districts and zoom into PSC District 3, you'll see it's made up of the core counties of metro Atlanta, Fulton, DeKalb, Clayton, and previously Rockdale, before the maps were redrawn. Those counties are overwhelmingly African American, and if you keep the energy burden map in mind, that's also the area with the most energy-burdened households. If you look at the elected officials who represent that area outside the PSC, they're overwhelmingly people of color and mostly Democratic, yet this district's PSC representative has been a white male Republican for well over 100 years, with few exceptions.

So I started asking why, and it really comes down to the statewide election structure. Despite people in the district trying to vote out that commissioner because he kept voting against their interests, their votes were being drowned out, or diluted, by voters in other parts of the state, many of whom aren't even Georgia Power customers. That's a classic case of vote dilution, a violation of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. So I filed a lawsuit along with several other plaintiffs challenging this election method, and in August of 2022, a judge agreed with us and ordered the Secretary of State to remove the PSC races from the ballot, and the General Assembly to remedy the election structure. I want to be clear, this is a victory not just for Black voters, but for all voters who deserve a commissioner who truly represents the unique needs of their district. The state did file an appeal, and we had a hearing in December, we're eagerly awaiting that ruling now to learn what the fate of PSC elections will be.

Still, none of this legal action stopped the Public Service Commission proceedings from moving forward. In the middle of our lawsuit, in 2021, during the pandemic, commissioners moved to allow Georgia Power to add additional fees to power bills, further straining customers who were already stretched thin during a national crisis. They also approved disconnections in the middle of summer, during the pandemic, resulting in tens of thousands of households being disconnected from a vital utility, again, mostly low-income households and people of color. I actually just came across a report from the Energy and Policy Institute last night revealing that Georgia Power was among the top three utilities nationally to disconnect customers during the pandemic, amid record corporate profits.

That brings us to the 2022 IRP and rate case. Again, we were seeking more renewable energy investment, more investment in energy efficiency programs that help low-income customers who are unlikely to access solar in the near future, and we wanted to keep rates steady during the rate case. This time, we decided to try filing individual ratepayers as interveners, because the PSC, under Tricia Pridemore's leadership, had moved to make public comment nearly inaccessible, even stating early in the year that there would be no public comment at all. For context, the 2019 rate case's procedural scheduling order allowed for testimony from public witnesses, but the 2022 order eliminated public witnesses entirely. So we worked to help 26 regular, everyday ratepayers from all over Georgia file to intervene, a very complicated process, shout out to my organizing director for all that work.

That didn't make the Public Service Commission very happy. In late July, the PSC issued an amended procedural order stating that any individual presenting testimony in the proceeding could not conduct cross-examination of other parties, an apparent attempt to limit interveners' ability to ask hard questions of Georgia Power's witnesses. In August, the PSC issued a memo backtracking, alarmed by the wave of public participation and interveners we'd filed, now allowing public comment again, but with new guidelines that still severely restricted participation, limiting the comment period to the first day of hearings only, for about an hour, with each speaker restricted to about three minutes. That was really only enough for about 20 people to give comments, and any public commenter had to leave the hearing room after speaking. These are all real equity issues, a real lack of transparency. The PSC ultimately rejected all of our intervener applications, and asked us to consolidate them under GCV Education Fund, which we declined to do, since in previous rate cases we'd been accused of being a special interest. So we engaged the public instead through a media campaign, vigils, and rallies, organizing people from all over the state to speak during public comment. Commissioners were visibly agitated during public comment, and some even went so far as blocking critical voices on social media.

As you all saw, all of this culminated in a major rate increase. The state's largest electric utility will collect $1.8 billion from ratepayers over the next three years. I've heard Georgia Power executives try to frame this as people simply paying for the power they use, which I find flippant, since people who want electricity, which is nearly everyone in the year of our Lord 2023, don't really have a choice but to pay for it to survive and thrive. It's really difficult to get by without electricity in 2023. So the real question is why they're paying so much, and whether the amount is fair. In the final rate case ruling, the Commission agreed to keep Georgia Power's return on equity, essentially their shareholder profits, nearly the same. Georgia Power has one of the highest returns on equity of any utility, set at 10.5% versus the industry norm of 9.5%. We have to ask why, and at least one commissioner agreed this was a concern, Lauren "Bubba" McDonald, the only commissioner to vote against the agreement, who argued the utility should pocket less money, noting it's a significant amount of revenue that ratepayers will be footing. When you look at the reasons why, it's clear the Georgia PSC is granting Georgia Power these unusual profit metrics in part to address Plant Vogtle's risk to stock and bond markets, Tim Echols is on video saying as much during the 2019 rate case administrative hearing vote. So everyone should be asking: is this fair? Is this sustainable? Is this just? Is this the best we can imagine for the future of energy?

Blair Beasley: Thank you, Brionté. Let me ask a quick follow-up before we turn it over to Alicia. You talked about different ways you and your organization have tried to bring community voices into the process. What have you found to be the best path forward for people listening in who want to share their concerns or opinions and have their voices heard at the Public Service Commission?

Brionté McCorkle: Commissioners are elected officials, so you can reach out to them directly, all their contact information is on the Public Service Commission website. I encourage you to call, email, and text them as much as you feel you should, and don't wait for a proceeding, tell them all year long what you want, what you need, and what you expect from your commissioners. For those active on social media, they can't block you there, so please tweet at them, whatever it takes to get in touch. We have some proceedings coming up where we really want a lot of people making public comment, so if you'd like to get involved, reach out to my organization at gcvedfund.org and sign up for our email newsletter, we'll communicate different opportunities to get engaged and come comment before the Public Service Commission. But again, you can reach commissioners any time, at public events, by email, by phone. Tell them how you feel, because they often say they don't hear enough from people, and that becomes an excuse for doing exactly the opposite of what most people want.

Blair Beasley: Thank you. All right, our last speaker of the day, last but not least, is Alicia Brown. Alicia, I'll turn it over to you.

Alicia Brown: Thank you, Blair, and wow, it's amazing being on this panel with so many people who've done such good work on these complicated proceedings. I especially want to shout out Brionté and GCV for getting so many community members who probably hadn't heard of the PSC before to come up and give public comment. It was truly some of the most powerful moments of the hearings, hearing about some of the struggles people have gone through.

My role in the IRP and rate case proceedings was representing the Georgia Coalition of Local Governments, which consists of the City of Savannah, the City of Decatur, the City of Atlanta, the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government, and DeKalb County, Georgia. The five of us have been working closely together through the Southeastern Sustainability Directors Network for several years now, and as each of us passed clean energy goals and developed plans to achieve them, we realized we weren't going to get there without getting involved in the more formal processes that dictate our energy resources.

We're united by our clean energy goals, most of us targeting as soon as 2035, and not just for our government operations, but community-wide. We're also united by our concern for our citizens, particularly those impacted by energy burden, as Brionté was pointing out. Some of the worst, most severe energy burdens are concentrated in the Atlanta metro area, where most of our coalition members are located, and in the Savannah area, where I am.

We were advocating for a lot of the same things Jill, Kevin, and Brionté were talking about. We occupy a somewhat unique space in the IRP, since we're large customers with our own interests and clean energy goals for our operations, but we're also representing our communities, and there really hadn't been a voice like that in the process before. One issue we pushed hard for was expanding the popular monthly netting program. If any of you have been to Savannah, and I imagine many of you have, we're renowned for our tree canopy, and we're serious about protecting it, we can't just go out and clear-cut land, if we had enough land in the first place, to build large solar farms, that's just not practical for us. But we do have a lot of rooftop space, and some capped landfills and similar sites that would be excellent for solar, if there were a mechanism that didn't cause us to lose tremendous amounts of money on that investment. Monthly netting is really important to us, and was a focus, because we specifically want to make sure our more energy-burdened communities have a pathway to accessing solar, and that's not going to happen if you're only receiving avoided cost, or even four cents above avoided cost, when Georgia Power can turn around and sell that same electron back to the grid at the full retail rate. It's honestly hard to support paying rooftop solar customers anything less than that retail rate.

We're also big fans of community solar, since, as Jill mentioned, some people just don't have a suitable roof, their house isn't structurally sufficient, they don't own it, or it's shaded by some of our magnificent live oaks. There are a lot of reasons someone can't participate in a rooftop program, so we want a functioning community solar program for that purpose. There are also broader benefits to community solar, you can strategically locate it in places that benefit the grid, you get economies of scale, you can attract outside businesses, a lot of the benefits we talk about with the clean energy transition would be well realized through community solar.

We also pushed hard for energy efficiency as a solution to some of these energy burden issues, and the coalition tried to call out ways the existing energy efficiency programs could be improved, based on our experience with our own residents. One thing we raised is that the condition of many homes makes energy efficiency work difficult or impossible. If you have an active moisture problem, it doesn't make sense to insulate a house. If you have an old home with knob-and-tube wiring, you can't spray in insulation. If you have an active gas leak, sealing that home could have serious health consequences. Currently, there's not a good program through Georgia Power, or otherwise, to resolve those prerequisite health and safety issues, so even though these most disadvantaged customers are paying for energy efficiency on their bills, they're often unable to actually participate in it, and just continue falling further behind.

We also raised issues about streamlining the income qualification process, suggesting a census tract approach, since you can look at a census tract and see what the average energy burden is there. Given what we know about the history of redlining, people of similar income levels tend to end up living together, you're not going to find Jeff Bezos living in a neighborhood with a per capita income of $20,000, it just doesn't happen. But those kinds of common-sense solutions, which would have administrative benefits for Georgia Power as well as equity benefits, haven't gotten the traction we wanted yet.

Another issue is energy affordability. We pushed hard to prevent the worst of the proposed rate increases, and to really hold the proceedings up to scrutiny, asking tough questions like whether the plan approved in the IRP is fully taking advantage of the new incentives for solar and storage under the Inflation Reduction Act, and whether we really need six new gas power purchase agreements approved in 2022 when some don't even come online until 2028. Are we making these decisions with the full consideration they require, and really grasping how much this could affect people? I also asked questions about some of the discounts Georgia Power offers. We have an income-qualified senior citizen discount, and I got some pushback from certain commissioners for asking why seniors are treated differently than younger adults in dire financial straits. If you're a young person with a disability, or in unfortunate circumstances, maybe you've been laid off, why should a senior receive better treatment than you? Why can't we treat all income-qualified individuals with the respect they deserve, and provide the support they need? Because in the year of our Lord 2023, everyone needs access to electricity.

We've also advocated for electric vehicle infrastructure, since we're reaching a point where lower-cost electric vehicles are more available, and with gas prices where they are, there are real savings opportunities we want to bring into low-income communities, which means making sure we have the charging infrastructure to support them. And finally, as Kevin alluded to, we've pushed hard for access to the data we need to make good rate selection decisions. Since we don't have net metering, it makes financial sense to size solar systems to minimize exports, so if we're generating this data, and being pushed into a less economical solar structure as a result, we should at least have the tools to work with it.

Going forward, we're looking to take some of these unresolved fights to the legislature. We're monitoring bills that could hopefully provide pathways for monthly netting and potentially competitive community solar, and we're hoping those will include robust data access provisions. I will say, we did get some wins from this advocacy: the community solar program is no longer a premium program, it's probably better described as bill-neutral now, and there's some discussion of a corporate-subsidized, income-qualified program. We also saw the increase in energy efficiency targets, and a motion from Commissioner Johnson opening up some data access, resolving some of the issues we'd raised. And we've seen robust investment in Make Ready, the infrastructure needed to support EV charging.

So our involvement really does make a difference. I do agree with Brionté about incrementalism and its challenges, I honestly hate going to community meetings and hearing people say, "I reached out to my public service commissioner and they still raised my rate." It's like, yes, but we saved you a billion dollars over three years, and I know it doesn't sound that great to say we saved $1.1 billion when there's still a 1.8 billion dollar increase. But it's about continuing to engage the right people, and specifically trying to get more powerful players to the table. We've been trying hard to get more businesses to join the advocacy, and we're hoping partners like Drawdown Georgia can help us grow our coalition beyond local governments to include community organizations and businesses too, while also increasing the ranks of local governments, especially getting more of our rural communities, who are currently underrepresented in the coalition, involved, since that might command a bit more respect from the political makeup of the Commission. And with that, I'm open to questions.

Blair Beasley: Thanks, Alicia. I'm going to ask one quick follow-up, but I want to remind everyone you can put your questions in the Q&A box, we'll take a few before we wrap up. Alicia, this was the first time cities joined together in this way to intervene before the Public Service Commission. Are you thinking of doing this again? Do you expect it'll be the same group of cities, or are you open to expanding your partnerships?

Alicia Brown: We're definitely planning to do this again. We're planning to be involved in some of the issues lingering from the IRP, like extending the income-qualified discount to non-seniors. We're also planning to be back in 2025, and we're open to any city or county government that would like to join us, we'd love to see the ranks grow.

Blair Beasley: Great. We're going to take a few questions from the chat box before we wrap up, and I'll get everyone out on time. First, Jill, I see you answered Patty Duran's question in the chat, but I wonder if you could talk about it a bit more. If you were a customer who was part of that 5,000-customer capped net metering program for rooftop solar, are you able to stay in that program, or are you being moved onto the new rate?

Jill Kysor: Thanks, Blair, and thanks, Patty, for the question. In the final rate case order, as part of the stipulation that Commission staff, Georgia Power, and some others entered into, those 5,000 existing net metering customers can stay in that program for 15 years. I don't know if everyone can see the answered questions in the chat, so let me just say it here too, there's a stipulation attached to the final rate case order, and it's paragraph 33 of that stipulation that includes the 15-year grandfathering provision.

Blair Beasley: Great, thank you, Jill. I'm going to send this next one to Alicia. You mentioned that new federal legislation impacts some of the technologies the Public Service Commission considers, including solar. Were bills like the Inflation Reduction Act factored in by the Public Service Commission as they went through this year's process?

Alicia Brown: Part of the challenge was that the IRA came partway through the process, so I don't think it got the full consideration it deserved, and that's something we raised in the rate case, the potential need to redo some of the modeling done in the IRP to reflect the IRA. Part of the concern was that it might not have changed too much, given some of Georgia Power's modeling choices, namely that solar doesn't offer any capacity contribution, with or without storage. There were also general concerns around interconnecting additional solar, given the lack of transmission capacity between southern Georgia, which is ideal for solar, and northern Georgia, where most of the load is. So I don't know how much would have changed, but I do think there should have been additional consideration that just wasn't given at the time.

Jill Kysor: And Blair, if I could add something on the IRA too, building on what Alicia said. In the rate case, one of the challenges we faced in our net metering advocacy was arguments made to commissioners by Georgia Power and some of their witnesses that we don't need to expand net metering because we have the IRA, and don't yet know the benefits that might flow from that. Even with incentives like tax credits being put back up to the 30% level for rooftop solar, we had to do some myth-busting with commissioners, first, that this isn't a jump from zero to 30%, the tax credit hadn't been ratcheted down very much, or for very long, it's really just being restored to the full 30%. And we also had to remind commissioners that tax credits alone can't solve this problem, we need good policy in place too, for instance, pushing back against forcing solar customers onto an expensive demand charge tariff, since that could erode any benefit they'd get from increased tax credits. So policy is still really important and relevant here, and the Commission still has a lot of power over what happens moving forward.

Blair Beasley: Thanks, Jill. I'm going to take two more quick questions. First, we heard some comments about the Make Ready program involving EVs. Kevin, do you have information for people interested in what that program is, and what the Public Service Commission decided in that space?

Kevin Kelly: I'll take a shot. The Make Ready program is the utility's investment in expanding EV charging infrastructure throughout the state. If I remember correctly, and I don't remember the exact numbers, Georgia Power proposed a certain amount of expenditure over three years. In the stipulation, that was scaled back to about 35% of the original proposed amount, and then there was a commissioner motion on the final day of decision that grew it back up to, I believe, about 60 to 65% of the original Make Ready investment. So there's a significant amount of money going toward EV charging infrastructure, but not as much as was originally proposed.

Blair Beasley: Thank you, Kevin. And Brionté, I'm going to let you have the last word before we wrap up. Two things I saw in the Q&A box: someone interested in joining your mailing list, how can they do that? And also, you mentioned this earlier but it may have gotten buried a bit, what's the current state of play on the court case moving forward about PSC elections?

Brionté McCorkle: Yeah, absolutely. You can connect with us at our website, gcvoters.org, or gcvedfund.org, both are great places to connect. The Ed Fund is more focused on organizing and mobilizing GCV voters, and gcvoters.org has a bit more of a political and legislative lens to it, so whichever fits your interest. On the state of play for the lawsuit, we had an appeals hearing in December, and we're waiting on the ruling from that hearing. That ruling will determine whether the General Assembly needs to redesign the Public Service Commission races. What that redesign would look like was left very open by the judge, so it could be any number of things, we'd hope to see something we believe is equitable, like district-based elections. But if they overturn the original ruling and decide the races are fine as is, then we're expecting a special election under the current rules. So it's either the ruling gets upheld, we go to the General Assembly, they fix the races, and there's a special election with new rules, or it gets overturned and there's a special election with the old rules.

Blair Beasley: Great, well, thank you all again for coming and presenting, and thank you to everyone who tuned in to learn more about the IRP and the rate case. We'll be posting a video of this webinar on the Drawdown Georgia website, drawdownga.org, so you can watch it again or share it with your colleagues and networks. For those of you who want to stay up to date on webinars and programming like this, as well as climate solutions happening across Georgia, I'd encourage you to sign up for our newsletter, it's free, and it comes to your inbox twice a month, also available at drawdownga.org. Thank you again, we really appreciate our panelists and our audience, and we'll see you all soon.