

Solar energy is poised to make an appearance in the state, in good part due to the efforts of a single Republican state legislator. That will be a big change: South Carolina has had essentially no wind or solar power, although nuclear accounts for half of its electricity.

The state senator, Chauncey (“Greg”) Gregory, hails from Lancaster, South Carolina, which calls itself the Red Rose City. Nearby York calls itself the White Rose City. This War of the Roses theme may reflect the ante-bellum South’s image of itself as the offspring of the English aristocracy. Gregory himself runs a building supply company in Lancaster, an urban area of about 20,000 inland near the North Carolina border. He was visiting a sister in Portland, Oregon, where he was struck by the amount of rooftop solar in a place best known for its overcast and rain. “Why couldn’t sunny South Carolina have solar power?”, he wondered.

Gregory has spearheaded the fight for solar energy in the state. Solar energy wasn’t going to get anywhere in South Carolina without support from Republicans like him. The GOP has about 60% of the seats in both houses of the legislature. Hillary Clinton got only 40% of the vote. So obviously, talking about climate change would have been counterproductive.

An important part of Gregory’s message was that South Carolina was behind its neighbors to the north and south, and it needed to catch up to attract investment. But a major factor in his success was due to something beyond his control: Duke Power switched positions to support the bill. He attributes this to shareholder pressure, but it would be really interesting to know more.

He was the sponsor of SB 1189, which became law in the summer of 2014. It made South Carolina law far more open to solar power. For the first time, homeowners could lease solar systems rather than having to buy them outright. It also authorized utilities to build solar farms and include them in their rate base. It also introduced net metering (a power buy-back plan) to South Carolina. And it set the first renewable energy requirement for utilities, requiring them to have solar capacity equal to 2% of their average peak demand by 2021.

SB 1189 has given solar a much needed boost in South Carolina. Investment went from \$11 million in 2015 to \$109 million in 2016. The state’s two major utilities both filed plans to each add over 100 megawatts of their own in solar. Utility scale generation from solar companies has also taken off, with \$163 million in utility-scale projects announced just this year for Orangeburg County in the middle of the state.

South Carolina also gives households a 25% tax credit for solar installation. Gregory sponsored legislation to provide a property tax exemption for solar, but was only able to get

it through the Senate, not the House. He says he'll try again.