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A Blow to Nuclear Power in Chicago

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As the world media filled with the victory of Barack Obama, a defeat for atomic power in his own back yard sent a Solartopian message to the new administration.

In the Chicago-area communities of Oak Park, Berwyn and Riverside, voters approved by well over two-to-one a referendum asking that "our elected officials in Illinois take steps to phase out nuclear power in the state, replacing it with renewable sources such as wind and solar."

The three communities currently rely on atomic power for some 75% of their electricity, which is supplied through Commonwealth Edison, a subsidiary of Exelon, America's largest nuke owner. With 11 operating reactors, Illinois has more reactors than any other state.

But 31,586 (68.3%) voters approved the referendum, versus 14,676 (31.7%) opposed.

Atomic energy will be one of the most critical issues the new administration will face. Obama was criticized by eco-advocates for taking campaign donations from Exelon. Both he and Vice President-elect Joe Biden expressed campaign support for atomic power.

But their stance was moderated by Obama's insistence that atomic power be "safe," and by his ads he ran in Nevada opposing the Yucca Mountain radioactive waste dump. Some 80% of Nevada citizens oppose that project, whose projected cost now runs about \$100 billion.

By contrast, John McCain vehemently advocated the quick construction of some 45 new reactors. He derided the moderation of Obama's reactor advocacy, pointing with pride to his own naval service on nuke-powered vessels.

But the issue of how to finance such a "nuclear renaissance" now overshadows all the rhetoric, and will define the technology's future.

A strong lobby with a slick, expensive public relations campaign is now pushing new nukes here. New ratepayer-based reactor financing is now being shoved through state public utilities commissions in Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas and possibly elsewhere, with tens of billions in potential liability.

But Wall Street has given thumbs down to a technology that can't compete with Solartopian sources like wind, solar, tidal, geothermal and other green energies.

The future of new reactor construction thus depends on massive federal and state subsidies. In the fall of 2007, the industry inserted into a Congressional energy bill a package of loan guarantees meant to provide \$50 billion in taxpayer-backed funds to build new reactors.

Reactor projects fail about 50% of the time, and such a package could have stuck taxpayers with a massive liability. A national grassroots campaign led in part by NukeFree.org and musicians Bonnie Raitt, Jackson Browne and Graham Nash helped defeat the package. Not a single major national environmental organization supported the guarantees.

This fall an even larger federal loan plan, offering virtually unlimited funds, was on its way to the US Senate. Pushed by McCain, it could have provided a half-trillion dollars in new taxpayer guarantees to build just the 45 reactors

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McCain proposed.

But when Wall Street collapsed, the federal bank bailout made the idea of taking on still more huge financial liabilities untenable.

As Barack Obama takes office in January, green power advocates will again argue that along with questions of terror and error, radioactive waste and ecological harm, nuke power is far too expensive to compete with Solartopian green power.

The clock is ticking very fast on the idea of new nukes. With projected construction times of a decade or more, new reactors cannot begin to deliver energy for many years after the installation of competing green sources, whose comparative costs continue to drop.

So this small but strong Chicago-area vote for a Solartopian future sends a very clear message. A powerful new nuke lobby will be pushing hard from Day One of the new administration.

But in today's financial and political climate, atomic energy cannot compete. A green-powered planet is the only one that will sell on both Main Street and Wall Street.

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