

# CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

By **Jimmy Banish**

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Commentary: Solar power should be accessible to all businesses

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Over 600,000 DTE ratepayers lost power across the state of Michigan at the end of February due to the catastrophic ice storms – I was one of them. Almost a week later, I was fortunate to finally have my power back, though tens of thousands in our region were still left in the dark.

Sadly, this is a familiar story for those of us located in DTE's service territory.

Even though these ice storms hit much of the Midwest, DTE owned the most prolonged and severe outage in the region. To make matters worse, this has all unfolded against the backdrop of their proposed record-breaking rate hike of 14 percent by DTE – ensuring that customers already struggling with financial hardship as a result of the outage will be even worse off.

The utility's failure to invest in its infrastructure has real economic consequences, both for families and small businesses like ours. Our family owns and operates The Bear Factory in Whitmore Lake. Over the summer, we lost power due to the violent wind storms and had to shutdown operations – costing us about \$100,000 in lost sales. To a small business like ours, that's a major hit.

Fortunately, we were able to invest in our own energy independence at home, knowing that without significant investment in the power grid by DTE, my family would be burdened with another prolonged outage. We purchased a new solar energy installation and battery storage, which proved vital during these latest series of storms. We looked to clean energy to not only be more environmentally friendly, but to also realize a cost savings over time, and provide some independence from DTE's unreliable grid – a true win-win-win. But not everyone can afford to make such an investment.

That's why we must also support community solar. Two common sense pieces of legislation will be heard before the Michigan legislature again this session. Together, these bills would increase access to solar across Michigan by fully enabling community solar projects. Currently, state law precludes these types of projects and instead grants exclusive control over community energy projects to utility companies, like DTE. Under this new legislation, locally-permitted community-owned solar projects could proliferate. This would create jobs, increase property tax revenues, reduce energy bills, and help to reduce our carbon emissions.

There is still more we can do to incentivize solar and increase our energy security. We must remove the 1 percent cap on distributed generation in the state of Michigan. Currently, the law hampers job growth, restricts renewable energy investment, and reduces access to affordable clean energy. Yet, it comes as no surprise that the legislation to raise that cap was actively lobbied against by both DTE and Consumer's Energy last year.

The solutions are clear and the realities of climate change demand swift action. DTE must stop blocking the pathway for distributed solar generation and community solar and they must update their outdated and failing infrastructure across the state. The Michigan State House and Senate Energy Committees should hold hearings including experts, those of us affected by the outage, and DTE and Consumers Energy to demand accountability and reform. They should pass legislation to ensure that community solar and distributed generation can be significantly ramped up.

The reality is that unless we carve out a path for more clean energy, reduce our reliance on DTE's grid, and see real utility accountability and investment we're going to be telling this story all over again. It's time for Michigan to, quite literally, take our power back from DTE.

*Jimmy Banish is the co-owner of The Bear Factory and a longstanding member of the Great Lakes Business Network which advocates for a rapid and just transition to a clean energy economy across the region.*

Main Image



Jimmy Banish  
Commentary

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