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Poll: Support up for solar energy investment

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Floridians want more solar power, even if it costs a little more, according to a new state survey.

High consumer demand has exhausted the state's solar rebate program fund six months early, and lawmakers and solar advocates on Thursday released the new survey showing Florida residents overwhelmingly support spending more money on solar energy.

The survey of 625 registered voters, conducted by **Mason-Dixon Polling & Research**, showed 85 percent believe the state Legislature should act to encourage investment in solar energy, and 81 percent said they support investment, even if it costs \$1 extra on their monthly utility bills.

"It's clear that the Sunshine State likes the idea of Florida becoming a solar energy leader," said Bruce Kershner of the **Florida Solar Energy Industries Association**.

South Florida showed the most enthusiasm, with 87 percent in favor of solar energy investment. Central Florida and the Gulf Coast were close behind, and 80 percent of those living in North Florida also favored more state investment for solar energy.

Florida House Majority Leader Adam Hasner, R-Delray Beach, said residents understand solar energy could create jobs.

"It's clear that 'going green' is good for protecting our environment and strengthening our economy," he said.

While voters of all ages said they supported spending more on solar, 93 percent of those between 18 and 34 agreed. Statewide, the consensus crossed party lines, with 82 percent of Republicans favoring more public money for solar energy, compared with 87 percent of Democrats.

The poll also showed strong support for solar energy even if it led to an increase in utility bills. Overall, 81 percent of those polled said they were willing to pay \$1 more each month on their utility bill to support solar energy.

"Germany and New Jersey are current leaders in solar energy, and one thing you can say about those places is that sunshine isn't as plentiful there as it is in Florida," said former Congresswoman Claudine Schneider, who serves as president of the **Solar Alliance**. "With its plentiful sunshine, Florida has a God-given advantage when it comes to solar energy. What's needed is a long-term commitment from policymakers."

Last year, Gov. Charlie Crist and the Florida Legislature set aside \$3.5 million for the Florida Solar Energy System Incentives Program, which provides the rebates to residents and businesses on the purchase of solar equipment. Rebates were available for solar thermal swimming pool heaters, residential solar water heaters and commercial solar water heating systems. Some solar power panels or photovoltaic systems also qualified for a rebate.

But, the first-come, first-served program was so popular that applicants exhausted the funding in six months. The waiting list includes 500 solar rebates totaling more than \$1.2 million. To meet public demand, Crist's 2008-09 budget proposal included an additional \$10 million.

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