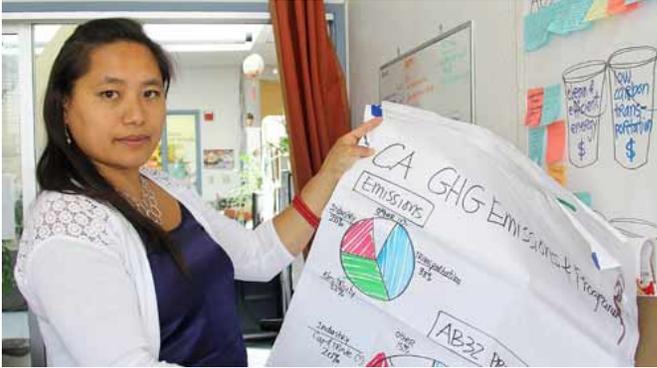


Why Filipino Americans Can Be a “Force in Calif.’s Energy Battles”



<http://newamericamedia.org/2013/10/why-filipino-americans-can-be-a-force-in-califs-energy-battles.php#>

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above photo caption: Mari Rose Taruc with Asian Pacific Environmental Network

As she sees utility rates continue to rise, Ofelia Dirige has become that much more conscious of conserving energy at home.

“I don’t use the A/C. I have fans. I pull the hair dryer out of the socket. I’m going to switch to energy-efficient light bulbs,” said Dirige, a San Diego-area resident and president of Kalusugan Community Services, a nonprofit health and wellness organization serving Filipino Americans. Kalusugan has received several grants from San Diego Gas and Electric Co. since 2007 and is one of the community organizations recruited to help inform hard-to-reach minority groups about ways they can reduce their utility payments.

Reducing energy bills is a “big item” for many of the families and seniors served by Kalusugan, Dirige said. “We’re concerned about people conserving energy. We want them to save some money ... so they can buy other things they need – food, clothing and maybe some entertainment they can’t do right now.”

Recent polls have found that Filipino Americans like other ethnic communities embrace conservation and policies to protect the environment.

A 2009 survey commissioned by the California League of Conservation Voters Education Fund shows that environmental issues are exceedingly important to about 75 percent of Filipinos personally, compared to 66 percent of the state’s voters.

The environment certainly concerns Albert Acena, a retired teacher who lives in San Mateo. “We have finite resources,” Acena said. “We should be conscious of our usage of water, and I definitely support environmental policies, solar panels and alternatives to fossil fuels because at some point we are going to run out of them.”

Acena has already taken steps to conserve energy at home.

Right now, he’s shopping for a fuel-efficient Honda car. “I want one that sips not guzzles gas,” he said. He also has a new energy-efficient refrigerator, which he noticed on his utility bill is saving him up to \$10 a month.

Ben Lou, a debt-aid small-business owner based in Fremont, said he tells his staff to turn off appliances and office equipment when they leave for the day. He also promotes other green practices at the workplace such as going paperless as much as possible and recycling outdated electronics.

“Most companies that have turned green get incentives from the government like tax breaks and refunds,” Lou added. That coupled with energy conservation can reduce business costs, “and we can pass these savings to our clients and lower charges.”

Still, despite a strong environmental bent and being the largest population of Asians in the state, Filipino Americans remain an untapped source of energy conservation among environmentalists and policymakers.

Filipinos are the largest Asian group in California, according to a recent report by the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice, a civil-rights organization in San Francisco.

The Filipino population statewide has reached about 1.5 million – an increase of more than 30 percent since 2000 and surpassing the Chinese at 1.3 million. But as far as income power goes, Filipinos fall about \$3,000 below the Asian American average, earning about \$27,000 a year.

Socioeconomic, language and other barriers are preventing even more Filipinos, other minorities and low-income residents in the state from taking full advantage of cost-savings programs and renewable-energy options such as solar and wind power.

JB Tengco, a solar-industry consultant from San Francisco, agrees that there definitely is a practical reason behind Filipino Americans’ interest in energy or environmental issues.

“It’s driven by economic savings,” Tengco said. “First, people were driven by environmental

reasons. But in the last few years, the vast majority who are buying hybrid vehicles or doing energy conservation are doing so because it saves them money.”

Tengco also said he sees Filipino homeowners installing or becoming interested in solar panels. In California, Filipinos have one of the highest rates of homeownership of any ethnic or racial group, and that potentially can translate into many homes going solar.

Mari Rose Taruc, state organizing director for the nonprofit Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) in Oakland, is trying to harness strong support for conservation among the state’s minorities to drive policies that bring environmental benefits and renewable energy to ethnic and disadvantaged communities.

“Filipino Americans are resourceful as are other immigrants,” Taruc said. “Who wouldn’t want to save money whether from electric bills or at the gas pump? I think if we understand that California’s climate programs as not only preventing global warming from getting worse but also benefitting our wallets then I think Filipino Americans would be extremely supportive of these new policies. APEN is working on these kinds of environmental policies to reach communities of color.”

Some research suggest that the cost of the state’s mandates – the price tag for purchasing renewable energy and building new transmission lines to deliver it - will drive up electricity rates.

A recent poll by the Public Policy Institute of California found that just under half of whites in the state said they would support a policy to get a third of the state’s electricity from renewable sources even if it increases costs. Forty-three percent of Asians said this, compared to 40 percent for Latinos and 33 percent for blacks.

But Taruc says the decreasing costs of solar and efficiencies in renewable-energy generation and transmission provide opportunities to offset those higher costs.

“So it boils down to ... whether leaders, agencies and voters can politically maintain or even lower bills, especially for household customers,” she said.

Strela Cervas, co-coordinator for the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA) in Huntington Park, agrees that the growing Filipino population can be a force in the state’s energy battles. “If we are able to organize the Filipino community in a way that they become aware (of the energy issues), it definitely would be huge,” Cervas said.

Dirige and her Kalusugan organization are doing their part in Southern California. The group

works with SDG&E on outreach efforts to inform Filipino residents and businesses about the utility's programs and services that help households reduce energy use, particularly during the hot summer months when electricity demand surges and strains the state's power grid.

Kalusugan's outreach involves passing out fliers, posting information through social media and producing a television commercial in Tagalog. "Some Filipinos know how to conserve energy," Dirige said, but more should be aware.

In Northern California, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. does similar outreach because relaying information to Filipino and Asian communities can be a challenge due to communication gaps, said Steve Malnight, the company's vice president of customer energy solutions.

The Filipino community may not be aware of all the cost-savings programs and rebates offered by PG&E, said Erwin Bonilla, who serves as the company's senior program marketing manager of channel engagement.

Bonilla pointed out that his company's outreach includes Tagalog translation services, which go a long way in explaining the PG&E bill and other concerns to new Filipino immigrants.

Bridging communication gaps with consumers is hugely important, because energy efficiency and conservation play a significant role in helping the state meet its energy needs and goals to address climate change.

For example, even though Californians are seeing their utility bills go up, a recent study by the environmental advocacy group Natural Resources Defense Council noted that those payments are 25 percent below the national average because of the state's efficiency programs. Boosting energy efficiency and conservation, the report found, could keep more than 10 new power plants from being built and save utility customers billions of dollars.

Along with promoting energy efficiency among different communities, utilities have been investing in renewable projects. PG&E, for example, opened three solar plants in western Fresno County in 2011 that are generating a combined 50 megawatts of clean energy to light up 15,000 homes.

But while renewable projects increasingly are pursued, Cervas said she'd like to see more renewable energy projects such as solar directly in low-income and underserved communities on homes, community centers and businesses. That way, she says, minority and low-income residents, who often live near sources of pollution, can receive the full benefits of "the clean and green economy."

Cervas pointed out that Senate Bill 43 seeks to open up access to renewable alternatives for millions of Californians who currently are unable to take advantage of the state's clean-energy programs. Authored by state Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, the bill would establish a 600-megawatt statewide program allowing utility customers - including businesses, homeowners and renters - to buy up to 100 percent of their electricity from a renewable-energy site.

"The problem is a lot of solar plants are out in the desert and not in the urban areas where solar is needed the most," Cervas said.

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