

CLIMATE TALK

LET'S NOT OVERLOOK NEW SOURCE OF LIVING WAGE JOBS FOR OUR REGION

Linda Jorgenson

Like most of rural America, the last three decades have not been particularly prosperous ones for Ashland and Bayfield Counties. In 2017 both counties still struggle to replace “living wage” jobs like those we lost in the paper and wood products industries in the 1990s. With some exceptions, retail, human services, health care, agriculture and the tourism hospitality sectors have not been able to compensate at that \$20-30/hour manufacturing level. The median wage in Ashland County is \$19/hour and in Bayfield County it is \$22/hour, meaning half the families earn less than this amount and half earn more.



We are not alone. Since 2000 the US has lost five million manufacturing jobs. Some of this loss is due to off shoring, but it is estimated that in reality 80% of those jobs have been lost due to automation. The resulting wage decline has been partnered with wage stagnation. Even the Federal Reserve Bank is stumped as to why the current low unemployment rate is not pressuring wages to rise.

The result has been an unacceptable increase in the number of “working poor”, people who work full time jobs, but whose earnings now fall below the cost of living. The United Way of Wisconsin estimates that a very conservative survival budget for a family of four Ashland County would require an hourly wage of \$25.81/hour, and for Bayfield County it would require \$26.87/hour. Factoring out the families and individuals that fall below the Federal Poverty Level (16% for Ashland County and 12% for Bayfield County), that still leaves 32% of Ashland's population and 24% for Bayfield County that meet the definition of working poor.

When you combine those numbers with the number of families who live at or below the Federal Poverty level (\$24,000 for a family of four), it means 48% of Ashland County families struggle to make ends meet, and 36% of Bayfield County families. A population at that poverty level creates a drag on the overall economy. There is simply not enough extra cash circulating around to offer healthy support for our Main Street businesses.

But there is cause for optimism. One promising new “living wage” industry that is coming on fast in our area is renewable energy electricity generation, principally in solar. Every year in Ashland and Bayfield Counties increasing numbers of individuals and companies are adopting solar or wind electrical generation and purchasing electric vehicles. Across the country the number of jobs in renewable energy has now surpassed the number of jobs in coal and natural gas. The 2017 U.S. Energy and Employment Report says 187,117 workers are employed at coal, oil, and natural gas power plants compared to nearly 374,000 people in the solar industry.

Ashland and Bayfield Counties are poised to take advantage of this. Bayfield Electric Coop operates a large community solar garden in Iron River. There's a possibility that Xcel Energy

will locate its third one megawatt community solar garden in Ashland. The Washburn School District, the Washburn Housing Authority, Bayfield County and the City of Washburn are collaborating to install solar modules to generate electricity sustainably on their municipal and school buildings. Cheq Bay Renewables, a local volunteer non-profit, is helping families and businesses with a solar group-buy program that will reduce the cost of buying solar modules for their homes and businesses.

And this escalating transition to renewable electricity is building the demand for a host of new better paying jobs -installers of solar modules or wind turbines, technicians to monitor the output and regulate loads, people to repair installations, people to fix electric vehicles, people to install/repair vehicle charging stations.

These are new “living wage” jobs. Right now the median wage for solar installers is around \$49,000/yr., for solar technicians around \$40,000/yr. Wind turbine technicians earn a median wage of \$51,000/yr. Are these jobs far in the future? No. At the rate of conversion to renewable energy in our counties they will be needed tomorrow or next year. Best of all these are not jobs that can move away.

But capturing this technology shift is going to require some coordination and planning. High school science classes should be calculating things like the speed at which conversion is happening, tracking costs, and projecting the needs such as transport in an all-electric economy. Their automotive tech classes should have sections on repairing electric vehicles/charging stations. WITC needs to move more swiftly to prepare graduates to not only install and maintain wind and solar and understand battery storage options, but to lead in designing and innovating the technology for our rural area. All area citizens need to debate and discuss the impact these changes will have and how we will work together to make sure everyone can afford to hook up to this new economy.

For more information on the Solar PV Group Buy contact CheqBayRenewables.org.

Linda Jorgenson is a retired human services administrator active in Citizens' Climate Lobby and the League of Women Voters of Ashland/Bayfield Counties.