

COLORADO ENERGY OFFICE

Tackling “bold goals”

Energy director Will Toor to drive push toward renewables, electric cars

By Judith Kohler
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“I think we’re on the threshold of major market innovations where the medium- and heavy-duty vehicle fleet may be able to move toward electrification quite rapidly,” Colorado energy director Will Toor said. Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post

For Will Toor, it’s an exciting time to be on the front lines of energy and transportation issues.

Dropping prices are encouraging utilities of all sizes to switch to wind and solar. Options are increasing for drivers who want to go electric.

For six years, Toor worked on those issues as transportation program director at the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, as a member of the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission, as a Boulder County commissioner and as Boulder mayor. He has taken the helm at the Colorado Energy Office at a time when changes in energy and transportation are among the top agenda items of a new governor.

“Gov. (Jared) Polis has articulated some bold goals around clean energy and climate change, with the goal of 100 percent clean energy in the electric sector by 2040,” Toor said in a recent interview.

On Toor’s fourth day on the job, Polis signed an executive order reaffirming the previous administration’s goal of having nearly 1 million electric vehicles on Colorado roads by 2030.

However, the order makes a significant change in the 2018

Colorado Electric Vehicle Plan by directing that tens of millions of

dollars to replace older gas- and diesel-fueled trucks and fleet vehicles be used only for electric vehicles — not newer diesel and propane-fueled vehicles, as originally allowed. The money comes from the state's nearly \$70 million share of the national settlement with Volkswagen over allegations that it modified software to cheat on emissions tests.

"I do believe it's a very strategic investment," Toor said. "I think we're on the threshold of major market innovations where the medium- and heavy-duty vehicle fleet may be able to move toward electrification quite rapidly."

Toor also thinks there will be plenty of options for Colorado drivers if the state Air Quality Control Commission adopts a rule based on California's requirement that a certain percentage of vehicles sold in the state be electric.

The Colorado Automobile Dealers Association isn't reassured. The trade group says 75 percent of the vehicles sold in the state are trucks and sports utility vehicles, and there aren't a lot of those yet.

The association is suing to repeal tougher vehicle fuel-efficiency standards approved in late 2018 and has pledged to speak out if an electric-vehicle standard is considered.

"I understand their concerns," Toor said, "but it's important to recognize that when we talk about 75 percent of new vehicles being trucks, that actually includes everything from small crossovers up through pickup trucks."

Manufacturers plan to add more electric SUVs to their lineups, Toor said, so there should be more choices by the time the Colorado standard would take effect. Having an electric-vehicle requirement on the books will encourage automakers to offer a wider array of vehicles in Colorado, he said.

An Associated Press story saying cold weather can temporarily sap an electric vehicle's power, reducing its range by more than 40 percent, shouldn't be a big concern, said Heathersyn Higgins, Colorado Energy Office spokeswoman. Cold weather is more of an issue with the first generation of electric vehicles, and the state's commitment to building more public charging stations will help alleviate drivers' "range anxiety," she said.

Toor acknowledges that batteries for electric vehicles and storage come with their own environmental problems. The mining of metals and minerals used to make batteries can create significant, negative environmental damage. Disposal of batteries creates problems with the toxic waste.

"There's no free lunch. Every form of energy has impacts," Toor said. "But when you compare the environmental impacts of lithium batteries to the impacts of burning fossil fuels, I think it's a much smaller impact."

Working to extend the life of batteries and effective recycling efforts will be important, Toor said.

While interest in electric cars is rising, there's even more momentum to boost the amount of electricity generated by renewable energy sources, Toor said. Dramatically declining prices for wind and solar power and batteries to store that power are big reasons.

Xcel Energy Colorado, the state's largest electric utility, is retiring two coal-fired plants early and intends to increase renewable energy sources to 55 percent of its supply mix by 2026. It's working to cut its carbon-dioxide emissions to zero by 2050.

City-owned utilities and rural electric cooperatives in Colorado have set goals of cutting carbon-dioxide emissions and expanding the use of renewable energy sources.

Amy Oliver Cooke of the Independence Institute, a Colorado libertarian think tank and advocacy organization, would like state policy to focus more on decentralized "micro" electric grids, which she believes would "empower people rather than enrich Xcel Energy."

"Oftentimes Gov. Polis and Will Toor are well-intentioned, but my concern is that I think they're asking the wrong questions," said Cooke, director of the Energy and Environmental Policy Center at the Independence Institute. "In 2050, will the grid be powered 100 percent by industrial wind and utility-scale solar and batteries? The question we should be asking is: Will we still have a massive, centralized grid with behemoth power plants?"

Cooke also wonders if discussions of energy use will include looking at nuclear power.

"If you want carbon-free power on demand, nuclear has to be on the table," she said.

Moving forward, Toor said the energy office will meet with community members and engage a variety of stakeholders. Utilities and industries of all types, auto manufacturers and dealers and local governments will be important partners, he added.

A major focus of the office is energy efficiency, and Toor said he wants to work with the oil and gas, building and other industries in that area. A blog by the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, Toor's former employer, cites federal data saying recent reductions in carbon dioxide emissions nationwide has resulted from energy efficiency, which drives down demand for electricity.

The energy office has launched a program aimed at helping large industrial facilities improve their energy management to reduce use and costs.

With oil and gas, the bulk of the state's interaction with the industry is through the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission and the Department of Natural Resources, Toor said. However, he sees opportunities to work with the industry on increasing the efficiency of its operations.

The appointment of Toor as director of the state energy office "gives me great faith in what can be accomplished," said Suzanne Jones, Boulder mayor and the executive director of Eco-Cycle. She has known Toor since he was director of the University of Colorado Environmental Center. Toor, who has a doctorate in physics, served with Jones on the board of the Colorado Environmental Coalition, now Conservation Colorado.

"I don't always agree with him, but I'm always impressed by the intellectual rigor he brings to issues and his thoughtfulness," Jones said. "He's able to explain issues and bring people together around common values."

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