

Landing Suntech a boon for state

Nov. 23, 2009 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

Arizona finally got the missing piece of its solar strategy: manufacturing. It is a major national coup.

China-based Suntech Power Holdings, the global leader in photovoltaic modules, will build its first U.S. solar factory in the Phoenix area.

Every conversation about Arizona's ailing economy includes two points: The state needs a more diverse business base and higher-paying jobs.

Here's an enormous opportunity. Legislators, policy makers and business leaders should study Suntech's news release. The firm's reasons for choosing Phoenix could be guideposts in solar development: strong research, well-crafted renewable energy policies and a good [local business climate](#).

Arizona State University's long track record in solar research was a big lure for Suntech. High-level ASU staff - particularly Jonathan Fink, director of the Center for Sustainability Science Applications, and Rob Melnick, executive dean of the Global Institute of Sustainability - also traveled repeatedly to China, making personal connections with Suntech's chief executive, Zhengrong Shi.

Solar research is a major focus at Science Foundation Arizona, the public-private partnership a few legislators are inexplicably determined to undermine. Last spring, the foundation established the Solar Technology Institute to bring together the state's three universities and industry to develop and commercialize promising ideas. Current projects include photovoltaic efficiency and using compressed air to store [energy](#).

Strategic incentives - including renewable-energy tax credits the Legislature approved this year - also helped attract Suntech. When other states have their own financial carrots, Arizona must offer something to stay in the game. This one is well designed, tied to job creation and investment.

One particularly critical factor in building demand for solar, which is unfortunately under legal assault, is the Arizona Corporation Commission's requirement that regulated utilities must produce 15 percent of their power from [renewable sources](#) by 2025.

The Greater Phoenix Economic Council, too, has given solar a big push. Local businesses should take advantage of any spinoff and corollary opportunities, while also considering going solar for some of their own energy needs.

When growth picks up again in Arizona, this is a logical place for using solar in a big way in an entire housing development or a major commercial site.

Gov. Jan Brewer says other solar companies are scouting Arizona. She can be a powerful champion with a personal testimonial: She's had [solar panels](#) on her own home for decades, says spokesman Paul Senseman. Other state and local leaders should step up to support the policies underpinning solar development.

And somehow, we need to get a regional perspective. Six cities are vying for the Suntech site, raising the possibility of an unproductive bidding war.

Getting into the sunshine is easy in Arizona. Getting into the [solar industry](#) will take work, investment and strategy.