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Closing two Illinois nuclear plants is bad news for working people and a clean energy future

For more than 40 years, nuclear plants haven't been just a source of power. They've been vital to our local economy, with good-paying jobs.

By Contributor | Sep 24, 2020, 2:10pm CDT

Lonnie Stephenson



Steam escapes from Exelon Corp.'s nuclear plant in downstate Byron, Illinois. | AP

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In 1975, I started my career as a union electrician in the Illinois city where I was born and raised, Rock Island.

For more than 40 years, the Quad Cities Nuclear Generating Station hasn't been just a source of power; it's been vital to our local economy. Jobs at Quad Cities are good jobs,

providing working families the chance to secure a spot in the middle class. They're the kind of opportunities that are in too short supply these days.

Opinion

Many of the Quad Cities' manufacturing plants that once were the bedrock of the middle class have gone overseas, but the Quad Cities Nuclear Generating Station is still running, keeping the Quad Cities metro area working and providing safe, reliable power.

Carbon-free nuclear power has long been key to the economic health of communities throughout Illinois. On average, each of the state's 11 plants contributes \$40 million in annual payroll and \$470 million in revenue from buying local goods and services. The Illinois fleet also pays \$136 million annually in local taxes that go to much needed funding for local community services like schools, roads, and law enforcement.

With hundreds of thousands of Illinoisans out of work, these jobs help sustain our economy, which cannot take another hit.

That's why the **premature closing of the Byron and Dresden** nuclear plants is a blow to Illinois families on so many levels. It's a strike against the economy because it will cost Illinois thousands of middle-class jobs. It's a disaster for the local community, which counts on these plants to supply nearly \$63 million in tax revenue. And it's a setback to Illinois's ambitious efforts to combat climate change and eliminate greenhouse gases from its energy mix.

The devastation does not end there. Illinois' LaSalle and Braidwood nuclear plants also are at high risk for premature closure without legislation.

Gov. J.B. Pritzker has made clear his commitment to making Illinois a national leader in clean energy, setting a goal of 100% clean power generation by 2050. But the reality is that Illinois can't transition to a zero-carbon economy without nuclear power in the mix. Nuclear energy currently makes up 90% of the state's clean-power generation. Taking these facilities offline will make it near impossible to meet the governor's climate change goals.

In addition to being carbon-free, nuclear is the only source of generation that can reliably produce mass amounts of clean energy 24/7, 365 days a year. As crucial as solar and wind are, only nuclear can consistently power homes and businesses regardless of weather

conditions. The average nuclear power plant operates 92 percent of the time. That's precisely the kind of reliability needed in times of crisis.

Closing the Byron and Dresden nuclear plants won't hurt just members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, my union, who work there or the local residents who depend on these plants' tax revenue. The pain will be felt statewide.

We need lawmakers to take action. The General Assembly must pass legislation to stop the loss of any more jobs and preserve Illinois' best hope for a clean-energy future: nuclear power.

The clock is ticking on our economy and the climate. Delay isn't an option.

Let's get to work today in showing how Illinois can lead the nation in addressing the existential threat of climate change while preserving good-paying energy jobs that help our communities thrive.

Lonnie Stephenson is international president of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

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