

CHESSA Energize Summit 2026

Too Busy, Didn't Attend (TBDA) Report

September 15-16, 2026 | Omni Charlottesville, Virginia



On stage: Using AI Responsibly in Clean Energy, with Ally Niphakis (Xpansiv), Shyam Perugupalli (Strata Clean Energy), Jonathan Scharf, PhD (SkyTerra Group) and Sara Marra-Medeiros (enSights).

HIGHLIGHT FROM THE SUMMIT

"Energy storage can be a tool, an asset, that can be deployed in three years or less."

— Karan Patel, Rappahannock Electric Cooperative

Executive Summary

What mattered at the 2026 Energize Summit, and what it means for the next 12 months.

The Chesapeake solar and storage market spent two days on one question: how much of the forecast load is real, and who pays if it never arrives? Data-center demand framed the morning, affordability framed the politics, and county consent emerged as the real permitting queue. Storage emerged as the fastest asset the grid can add, if developers win the local conversation and document their supply chains.

ABOUT CHESSA

The Chesapeake Solar and Storage Association (CHESSA) is the solar and energy storage trade association for Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, committed to an effective and equitable clean energy transition across the region. Its Energize Summit (formerly Solar Focus) has convened the region's solar and storage industry for more than 15 years; the 2026 edition brought developers, utilities, regulators and advocates to the Omni Charlottesville on September 15-16. [8]

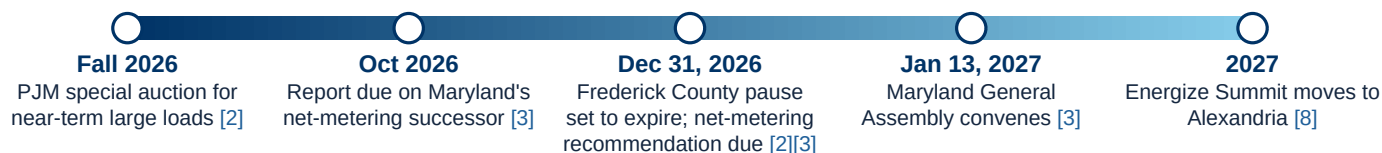
Six things that mattered most

- ON STAGE FROM SKYTERRA (Jonathan Scharf, PhD): on the AI panel, showed where agents already handle compliance review, R&D and back-office work, and where the air gap belongs. [7]
- Maryland's data-center pipeline reads 2.1 GW across nine facilities on paper, yet utilities report projects dropping out; by one panelist's count, only Potomac Edison projects new data centers. [2]
- Speculative load is the core risk: in Virginia, a \$250,000 deposit can hold a queue position for 10 or 15 years, and if the load never comes, everyone else pays. [2]
- Affordability became Maryland's number one concern: EmPOWER, the state's energy-efficiency program, was cut for short-term bill relief, and the session's facilitator sees appetite for a full renewable portfolio standard (RPS) overhaul waning. [3]
- Storage can deploy faster than new generation or transmission, but panelists saw no financeable path in the wholesale market run by PJM, the grid operator for 13 states and DC, and split on the fix. [1][4]
- The gating items are now local and federal: county hearings are won with transparency and a national fire code, and foreign-entity-of-concern (FEOC) compliance with a documented supply chain. [4][5]

Outlook

The next year tests whether the load shows up. Large-load tariffs, registries and collateral all exist to move the risk of a wrong forecast off ratepayers and onto whoever requests the capacity. Maryland's General Assembly reconvenes in January with affordability as its frame, and county pauses will decide how much of the paper pipeline is built. For storage, two things bind: compensation rules that still do not pay for exports, and county consent.

What happens next



SkyTerra on Stage

We joined the panel on responsible AI and showed where it already does the work.



Jonathan Scharf, PhD, on the Using AI Responsibly in Clean Energy panel.

Our CEO, Jonathan Scharf, PhD, joined Using AI Responsibly in Clean Energy on Wednesday afternoon, moderated by Ally Niphakis of Xpansiv, with Shyam Perugupalli of Strata Clean Energy and Sara Marra-Medeiros of enSights. Forty-five minutes of unusually specific talk about what AI already does inside energy companies, where it fails, and what must never be connected to it. [7]

- Compliance: we built a chatbot for a group of electrical contractors that checks CAD drawings against California's thousand-page Title 24 building code, with a few experienced reviewers checking the output. [7]
- R&D: our client SES runs an AI platform with an autonomous lab, its chemical data populated in work with NVIDIA, that closes the loop from simulation to physical test to the next proposed molecule. [7]
- Security: moving from single-tenant APIs to on-premises models buys data control at the cost of model capability, and non-deterministic models belong in a separate layer from deterministic control parameters. [7]
- From the panel: in a side-by-side pilot, Perugupalli's drones with AI were less error-prone and far more timely than human crews, though "not perfect" at "80%-ish"; Marra-Medeiros reported that 70% of distributed-generation assets underperform in some capacity. [7]
- On jobs, Perugupalli expects AI to replace tasks rather than jobs, Scharf expects "more jobs" but worries about how schools prepare people, and Marra-Medeiros urged care with entry-level roles. [7]

"Now you have a chatbot that can take that year and bring it down to a day or two."

Jonathan Scharf, PhD, SkyTerra Group, on Title 24 compliance training [7]

WHY THIS MATTERS

AI already reviews drawings and runs back-office work, and drone progress tracking has cleared a live-project pilot. The open question is governance: which models, which data, and an air gap around anything that touches a control.

Who Pays If the Load Never Arrives?

Data-center load looks real in the forecasts. The open question is how much of it will show up.

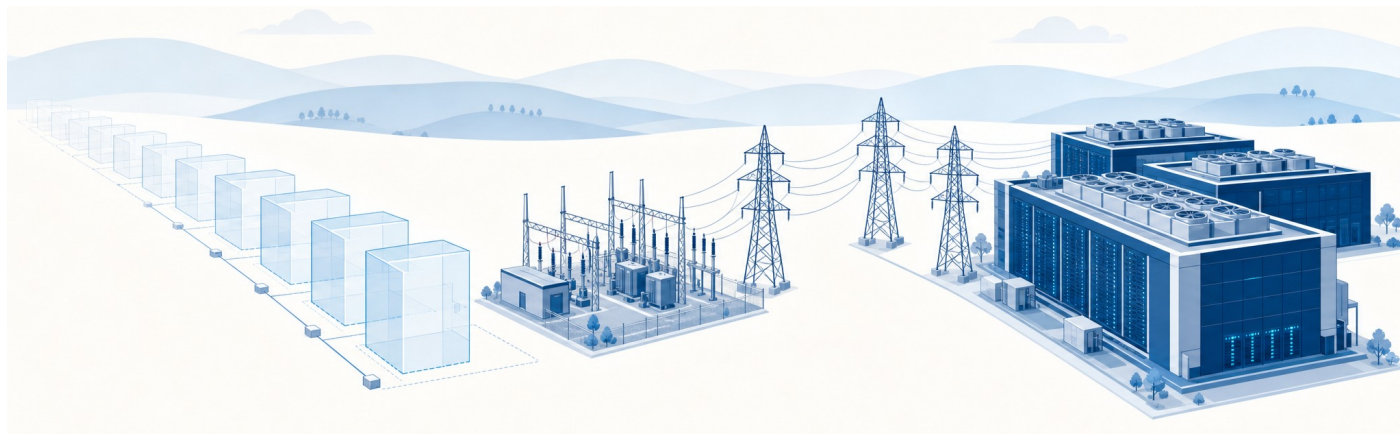


Illustration: large loads queuing for grid capacity.

The Day 2 opener, Demand Growth Reality Check, put PJM Interconnection, the Virginia State Corporation Commission, Align Energy Advisors and Gordon Feinblatt on one stage. PJM, which serves roughly 67 million end-use customers, described load forecasts rising steeply since 2023. The rest of the hour tested how much of that forecast is firm. [2]

"At least on paper, Maryland became an active data center market this year."

David Beugelmans, Gordon Feinblatt [2]

- The reality check: one Frederick County site could reach 2.4 GW at full build-out, yet utilities are "reporting either projects dropping out or no additional new projects," and by Beugelmans's count only Potomac Edison projects new data centers. [2]
- Counties are pushing back: pauses in Montgomery, Harford, Carroll and Washington counties, and new applications paused in Frederick County until December 31. [2]
- Maryland's 2025 Next Generation Energy Act required a large-load tariff for demand of 100 MW or more, intending that residential customers not bear the risk; this year's follow-on law lowered the threshold and created a statewide large-load registry. [2]
- PJM is running a special capacity auction this fall to meet near-term large-load needs, and even there utilities have argued the projections are too high. [2]

2.1 GW

of planned Maryland data-center projects across nine facilities

70 GW

large-load pipeline in Virginia's Dominion zone

\$250K

deposit that can hold a Virginia queue spot for 10 or 15 years, per Align Energy Advisors

WHY THIS MATTERS

Every tool discussed (tariffs, registries, collateral, readiness tests) moves the risk of a wrong forecast off ratepayers and onto the party requesting the load. For solar and storage that cuts both ways: more scrutiny of every queue position, and new buyers, since large loads are increasingly expected to bring their own capacity.

Affordability Sets the Agenda

In Annapolis and at the DC Commission, clean energy's case is now made in household bills.



Illustration: Chesapeake-region households and the cost of power.

Maryland in Flux walked through a legislature that reorganized itself: a new House Speaker, restructured committees, and a 2026 session in which rising prices overrode the environmental case. In the District, Public Service Commission Interim Chairman Ted Trabue put affordability first among his priorities: "First and foremost, I want to talk about affordability." [3][6]

"Affordability became the number one concern."

Georgina Arreola-Lennox, SEIA [3]

- EmPOWER, "a darling of Maryland," was cut significantly for short-term bill relief, despite legislators' own long-standing claim that each dollar returns \$1.20 or \$1.30. [3]
- Net metering is approaching its cap of three gigawatts; the successor proceeding opened in May, with a consultant report due in October and a recommendation to the legislature by year-end. [3]
- The old message, "we're green, we're good," stopped landing with legislators; the case now has to be made in bill savings. [3]
- Appetite for a complete overhaul of the renewable portfolio standard is waning ahead of the January session, in the facilitator's assessment. [3]
- DC: more than 14,000 residents at or below 80% of area median income now have solar, from a program that began with a goal of 28 systems. [6]

WHY THIS MATTERS

Clean energy's political argument has moved from environmental benefit to bill impact. Proposals that show near-term household savings, such as storage that trims peak costs or community solar for income-qualified residents, will travel further in Annapolis and at the DC Commission than long-horizon climate arguments.

Storage Still Lacks a Revenue Path

Across home batteries and grid projects, panelists agreed PJM revenue alone does not finance storage.



Illustration: home batteries aggregating into a virtual power plant.

The Day 1 plenary, Energy Storage at an Inflection Point, facilitated by Sunrun's Thad Culley, spanned behind-the-meter batteries, front-of-meter projects and virtual power plants (VPPs). Culley opened by questioning the premise: "I think we've seen a lot of inflection points in the last five years." Remedies on offer ranged from wholesale-market reform and state procurement to performance tariffs, VPP compensation and predictable local permitting. [1]

"I wish it worked."

Dominic Gatti, Tesla, on FERC Order 2222, which opens wholesale markets to aggregated resources [1]

- Under PJM rules a home battery cannot be compensated for exports, so most of its capacity goes unused by the wholesale market. [1]
- Gatti on Dominion's VPP pilot: an "embarrassingly small percent of that is actually for batteries, the most capable device type on the system." [1]
- A developer saw "not a path in the wholesale market" with financeable revenue and looked to state programs instead. [1]
- Distribution interconnection will "continue to get bottlenecked up more and more unless we change the way that it currently operates." [1]
- In Maryland, SEIA's Georgina Arreola-Lennox said a storage tariff may still need "an upfront incentive for a period of time." [3]

0.5 kW

credited from an 11.5 kW home battery without compensated exports

413 MW

Dominion virtual power plant pilot in Virginia

~1:1

PJM savings when utilities dispatch home batteries, nearly megawatt for megawatt

WHY THIS MATTERS

Until export compensation, VPP rules and distribution interconnection catch up, storage will be financed on state programs and utility pilots. That makes state policy (page 5) and local permitting (page 7) the levers to watch.

Winning the County Hearing

A developer, a co-op and a fire-service trainer on how battery storage earns local consent.



Illustration: a code-compliant storage site with first responders briefed.

Communicating Battery Storage Safety, moderated by Val Newcomb of Urban Grid Solar (Brookfield Renewable), gave a working playbook for the county hearing. Chris Meyer (East Point Energy), Karan Patel (Rappahannock Electric Cooperative) and Eric Wood (Energy Safety Response Group) argued the same community meeting from three sides. [4]

"Transparency is the best policy."

Eric Wood, Energy Safety Response Group [4]

- Meyer's playbook for a county: engage the fire department early, train responders, tour operating sites, and use trusted local messengers. [4]
- Code over improvisation: an ad hoc 100-foot setback floated at a planning commission would more than triple a project's footprint and clear its trees. Meyer argued for NFPA 855, the national fire standard for battery storage. [4]
- Wood's candor rule, because "everything we do in life is never at zero percent risk": the public case rests on layered mitigation, from codes and testing to battery management, training and funded first-responder coordination. [4]
- Patel's co-op math: about 65% of a residential bill is energy supply, Virginia imported about 36% of its generation in 2023, and storage can be deployed far faster than new generation or transmission. [4]

Site footprint for a 15 MW, two-hour battery project [4]

With an ad hoc 100-ft setback		about 5 acres
Without the setback		1.5 acres or less

WHY THIS MATTERS

Most storage opposition starts as a first impression. Developers who arrive with the fire department already briefed, a national code in hand and a candid account of residual risk are the ones who keep permits moving.

Tax Credits Now Ride on the Paper Trail

Foreign-entity-of-concern (FEOC) and material-assistance rules now shape procurement as much as price.



Illustration: tracing each component of a project's supply chain.

The Federal Issues Roundup brought SEIA, Roselle LLP, CleanCapital and Nexamp together on the rules reshaping solar and storage finance. The discussion was practical: what a developer can document, what remains unresolved, and who actually holds the data. [5]

- Document what you can: substantiate the product lines and suppliers you can trace, rather than trying to prove the absence of every prohibited connection. [5]
- SEIA's Alec Ward walked through the interim guidance and named what it leaves open: debt and entity testing, effective control, and qualified interconnection property. [5]
- Interconnection equipment can cost millions of dollars and is procured by utilities with little incentive to supply a developer's compliance data. [5]
- Effective control can be tested two ways: review the contractual rights granted, which can mean examining every single contract, or review the counterparties themselves. Exclusive warranty and service licenses were flagged as a risk. [5]

~100 pages

of interim federal guidance
developers must work through

July 4, 2025

start of the tax years that face the
entity and payment tests

2 states

require utilities to disclose FEOC
data on request (CO, MD); CA, NY
and IL are weighing it

WHY THIS MATTERS

FEOC compliance has become a procurement discipline. Developers and investors who build supplier documentation into contracts and interconnection requests now will close tax-equity deals faster than those reconstructing the paper trail at financing.

What We Took from Charlottesville

Five themes that ran across the sessions we covered.



Illustration: the Chesapeake grid as one connected system.

Speculative load is the organizing problem

The Day 2 opener kept returning to the same asymmetry: a large load can enter a queue cheaply and sit there, while utilities must plan and build as though it were real. The regulatory response is a ladder of tests (large-load tariffs, financial commitments, readiness criteria and registries) that moves the cost of a wrong forecast onto the party requesting capacity. [2]

Affordability replaced decarbonization as the frame

The word that reorganized Maryland politics in 2026 was affordability, and it cut against clean-energy programs as often as for them: EmPOWER was cut despite its returns, and RPS reform was described as losing momentum. It also topped the DC Commission chair's priorities. Clean energy now has to argue in bill savings. [3][6]

Local consent is the real permitting queue

Counties, not commissions, increasingly decide what gets built. Data-center pauses spread across Maryland counties, and the battery-safety panel was in effect the operational answer: early fire-department engagement, site tours, trusted local messengers and a national code instead of improvised setbacks. [2][4]

Storage is waiting on compensation

Nobody questioned storage's speed or grid value. What is missing is compensation: export credit for home batteries, VPP rules and a financeable wholesale path. Until those arrive, state programs and utility pilots carry the market. [1][4]

AI moved from pilot to production

The AI panel was concrete about what already runs: agents handling software and back-office work, a chatbot compressing a year of compliance training into days, drones out-reporting human crews on timeliness. Panelists expected AI to replace tasks more than jobs, and governance was just as practical: restrict which models are available, define what data may leave, and air-gap anything that can touch a control. [7]

References

Sessions at the CHESSA Energize Summit 2026. Quotations are verbatim, trimmed for length.

[1] Energy Storage at an Inflection Point

September 15, 2026. Facilitator: Thad Culley (Sunrun). Panel included Dominic Gatti (Tesla) and Ester Rekhelman (Hexagon Energy).

[2] Demand Growth Reality Check: Separating Signal from Speculation

September 16, 2026. Panel: a PJM Interconnection representative, Angela Navarro (Align Energy Advisors), a Virginia State Corporation Commission representative, and David Beugelmans (Gordon Feinblatt). The moderator is not named in the published agenda.

[3] Maryland in Flux: Policy Renovations In Progress

September 16, 2026. Elly Colmer (Compass Advocacy), John Lennon Miller (Chaberton Energy) and Georgina Arreola-Lennox (SEIA).

[4] Communicating Battery Storage Safety

September 16, 2026. Moderator: Val Newcomb (Urban Grid Solar, Brookfield Renewable). Panel: Chris Meyer (East Point Energy), Karan Patel (Rappahannock Electric Cooperative) and Eric Wood (Energy Safety Response Group).

[5] Federal Issues Roundup: FEOC, Material Assistance & the Rules Reshaping Solar and Storage

September 16, 2026. Published panel: Alec Ward (SEIA), Paige Anderson (Roselle LLP), Scott Elias (CleanCapital) and Stefan Bergere (Nexamp).

[6] A Glimpse at DC's Multi-Customer Microgrid Future

September 16, 2026. Opening remarks by moderator Ted Trabue, Interim Chairman, Public Service Commission of the District of Columbia; the panel discussion that followed is not covered in this brief.

[7] Using AI Responsibly in Clean Energy

September 16, 2026. Moderator: Ally Niphakis (Xpansiv). Panel: Jonathan Scharf, PhD (SkyTerra Group), Shyam Perugupalli (Strata Clean Energy) and Sara Marra-Medeiros (enSights).

[8] Chesapeake Solar and Storage Association

chessa.org and chessa.org/ces (2027 Summit in Alexandria), accessed September 24, 2026.