

Addison County Regional Planning Commission

14 Seminary Street Middlebury, VT 05753 • www.acrpc.org • Phone: 802.388.3141

Outreach Event 1:

Overview

On September 26th, at 5pm, the Addison County Regional Planning Commission (ACRPC) hosted the first of two public listening forums aimed at collecting Vermonter's input on statewide renewable energy and electricity policies. This event was a hybrid in person-online event held at the ACRPC offices at 14 Seminary St. in Middlebury and online using Google Meet. In total, nine people attended.

Almost all of the participants expressed their desire for seeing more pursuit/investment into community solar projects, a subject that came up frequently throughout the event. This subject appeared to be collectively viewed as an under-pursued avenue. It appeared that participants were in unanimous agreement that a top priority should be the ending of fossil fuel burning for energy and electricity generation as soon as possible. Several of the participants expressed their concerns about the level of influence utilities have on the creation of policies and programs. Green Mountain Power (GMP) was mentioned several times when these concerns were shared. This event was part of the Vermont Department of Public Services (PSD) effort to collect input from Vermonter's. The input collected during this event will be used as a part of a comprehensive review of Vermont's clean and renewable electricity policies and programs.

Approach to the Event

For this event, ACRPC performed outreach to several non-profit organizations within the Addison County region, to Town and Municipal leaders (selectboard, energy committees, etc.), and to regional state legislators. As part of this outreach, ACRPC requested that all parties share and spread the news of the event with their respective communities and constituents. A link to a webpage located on ACRPC's website was included in this outreach where supporting materials and background information provided by PSD was available for those interested in learning more.

This event was structured as a "standalone" event using the workshop template co-designed by PSD and members of the different Regional Planning Commissions (RPC's). During this event, ACRPC presented slides provided by PSD, utilized Mentimeter, an interactive presentation and polling program to engage participants and solicit input, and asked participants to complete demographic and feedback surveys. Although this event had been planned to be delivered in a sort-of "present information then ask key questions and then discuss" format, it quickly instead became more of an open discussion where participants freely shared their input and experiences while the conversation was being directed by ACRPC.

Partners

There were no partnering organizations for this event. ACRPC however, did meet with United Way of Addison County (UWAC) about the potential of partnering for this event. Instead of partnering, UWAC made suggestions and connected ACRPC with representatives from various community organizations who serve under-represented groups that would be good to invite.

How was this advertised

This initial event was advertised through email, on ACRPC's website, through ACRPC's monthly newsletter, and on PSD's Renewables "Regional Events landing-page" website. For this event in particular, light refreshments were advertised and offered to in person attendees.

Who Attended

This event was presented and led by Deron Rixon, a Planner at ACRPC with support from Maddison Shropshire, ACRPC's Energy Planner. Claire McIlvennie, Data & Equity Policy Manager from the Vermont Department of Public Service attended to help answer questions and engage with attendees.

In total, there were 9 participants in this event. 6 participants attended in person, and 3 attended virtually through Google Meet. The group of participants were generally older, mostly male, and generally very knowledgeable about energy policy. Several participants shared they were involved in energy committees, both presently and in the past. Nearly all shared working or involvement in energy and renewable energy fields.

Only 2 participants completed our demographics survey. Responses revealed differences across various demographics, including gender, education level, housing situation, age range, and income brackets.

What we heard

When ACRPC asked **“What do you think should be prioritized when thinking about where Vermont’s electricity comes from?”** nearly all participants agreed that switching to renewable resources that serve to stop the use of fossil fuels was the top priority. Another high ranking priority that was shared by many of the participants was the desire to see more investment/pursuit of community based solar projects.

Other priorities that were mentioned included:

- Affordability to consumers
- Localization of electricity generation within Vermont
- The revision or retirement of the Renewable Energy Certificate system
- Concerns about “greenwashing” when reporting Vermont’s electricity generation

Comments and Input:

- Need to stop burning fossil fuels and contributing to GHG emissions NOW
- Vermont should reevaluate how “renewable” is defined and how generation is being reported. Current approach is giving a “distorted view” and not reflecting reality
- Energy conservation should be incentivized and not viewed as “low-hanging fruit”
- Vermont shouldn’t be so dependent on Hydro-Quebec and should generate more from within the state

When the discussion shifted to reviewing current policies and programs, a number of participants expressed their concerns about utilities having too much influence over policy making and too much of a say on how electricity is to be generated/provided to Vermonters. Concerns regarding Green Mountain Power were raised by a few participants and described as being a “bottleneck” in Vermont’s efforts to decarbonize energy in the state.

Comments and Input:

- In reference to Tier 1 of the Renewable Energy Standard: allowing for any renewable resource “regardless of when it was built” to be eligible is a problem. How does it make sense for old or outdated generation methods to count towards Vermont’s renewable energy requirements when it may very well be an unclean source of generation
- REC’s “allow polluters to pay for the privilege to continue polluting”
- REC’s aren’t as transparent as they should be and are a form of “greenwashing”
- Vermont should look at what Maine is doing: democratizing/voting on creating a private in-state utilities company/organization where board will be voted in by residents
- Should be pursuing more progressive rate structures

Throughout the discussion barriers associated with renewable energy and electricity came up multiple times.

Some of the barriers identified by participants included:

- Land equity concerns, especially regarding Hydro-Quebec
- Low-income families and their access to pursuing renewable energy options
- Policies and programs are complicated/challenging to understand. Need to find ways to make them more accessible.
- How do we decide which is the “lesser evil” when it comes to pursuing new methods of electrical generation that also have negative impacts (e.g. land use change, impacts to natural resources, increases in costs to consumers, etc.)
- Change needs to happen faster but how can we do this while still maintaining a thorough process and thought through approach. Need to allow for everyone to share input but it takes a long time to do this comprehensively.

What the Public Service Department Should Know

The participants of this event were all white, mostly older, and were either highly educated on the subjects of discussion or worked/were involved in the field renewable energy and electricity.

During outreach for this event, and on the suggestion of United Way of Addison County (UWAC), ACRPC contacted the Addison County Community Trust (ACCT), (Now called Addison Housing Works). This organization serves low-income families, and other members of the region, and provides resources and help in finding affordable housing. A concern that was raised in the discussion with UWAC on connecting with ACCT, and soliciting attendance from lower income families and households served by ACCT, was the chance that renewable energy policies and programs might not really be “on the radar” of these community members. This thought arose from the consideration that families who are struggling with affording housing, and/or other basic needs, very possibly don’t have “space” to be concerned with policies surrounding renewable energy.

Reflections on the Process

There were no responses to the feedback survey from any of the participants. There was also nearly no involvement from participants, remote or in person, in the Mentimeter interactive polling presentation. Despite this, there was ample engagement in the discussion from both in person and remote participants. Although refreshments were offered and advertised in an effort to encourage attendance, the participants who attended in person appeared uninterested. This note is being made in an effort to identify whether or not this approach is worth pursuing for future events.

Outreach Event 2:

Overview

On October 4th, at 5pm, the Addison County Regional Planning Commission (ACRPC) hosted the second of two public listening forums aimed at collecting Vermonter's input on statewide renewable energy and electricity policies. This event was a virtual event hosted online using Google Meet. In total, five people attended.

Top priorities that were identified, and shared by almost all in attendance, included the reduction of carbon emissions as fast as possible and the desire to see increases in local renewable energy generation. Concerns raised by participants included Vermont's dependency on Hydro-Quebec, the high costs of electricity and energy to manufacturers and that leading to a subsequent decline in economic growth, and whether current policies are accurate, transparent, and honest.

Approach to the Event

Outreach efforts for this event were conducted similar to the efforts for our first event hosted on 9/26. ACRPC reached out to all the same contacts through email and advertised the virtual event through a webpage on ACRPC's website and through PSD's "landing page". When contacting community members through email, ACRPC once again asked for the information about the virtual event to be shared with any and all community members.

This second event was also structured as a "standalone" event using the same workshop template as our first event. The same slides were presented and Mentimeter was used to engage with participants. The same demographic and feedback surveys were also shared with participants for this second event.

Partners

There were no partners for this event.

How this was advertised

This virtual event was advertised in conjunction with the first hybrid event held on 9/26. Additionally, following the first event, and leading up to this second solely virtual event, the event was advertised through email to different organizations and members of the Addison county community.

Who attended

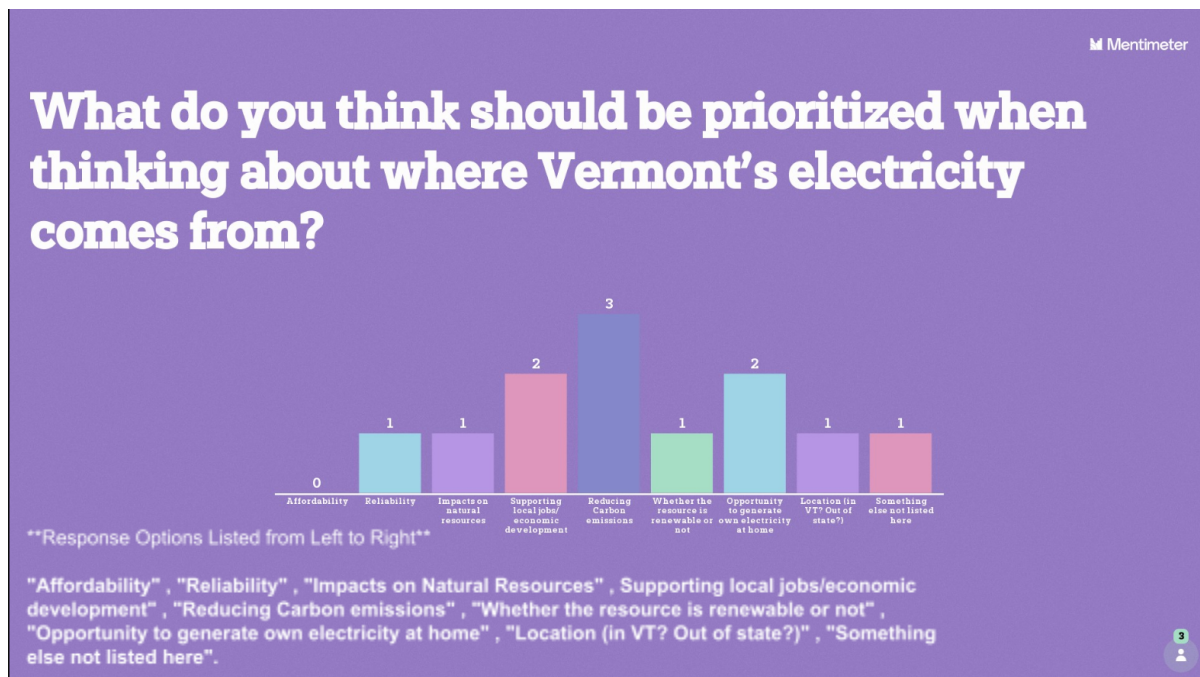
This event was presented and led by Deron Rixon, a Planner at ACRPC with support from Maddison Shropshire, ACRPC's Energy Planner.

In total, there were 5 participants at this event. All attended virtually through Google Meet. Some joined late and/or left the event early. The group was generally older and mostly male. Most attendees were very knowledgeable about electricity generation and policy and were involved in the sector in one way or another. One participant was representing the Vermont Chamber of Commerce and was very knowledgeable about business development. No participants completed the demographics survey.

What we heard

Mentimeter, an interactive polling and presentation program, was used to measure and record participants' responses to questions. Not all in attendance participated in the interactive poll and respondents to the poll could provide more than one answer.

When ACRPC asked “**What do you think should be prioritized when thinking about where Vermont’s electricity comes from?**” The top response was the reduction of carbon emissions. Responses to the Mentimeter poll are posted below.



Other high ranking priorities that were identified included supporting local jobs and economic development, the generation of electricity from home, and the overall increase in renewable electricity generation inside of Vermont.

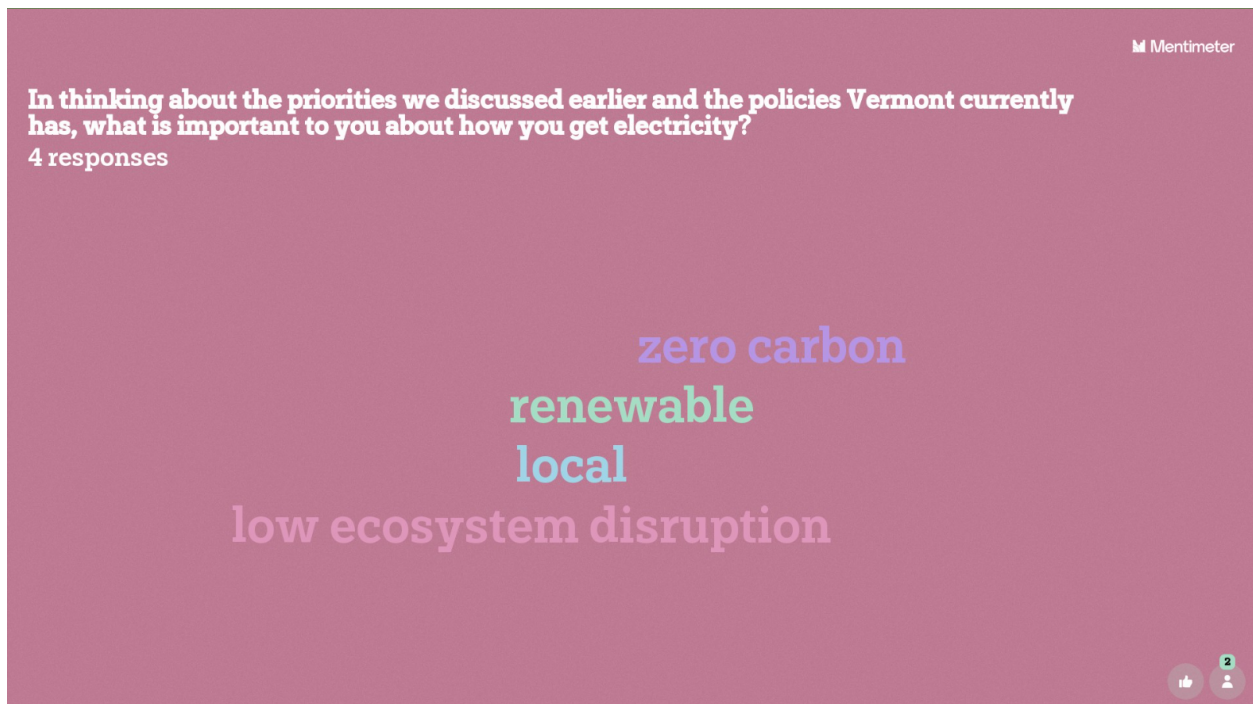
Other priorities mentioned included:

- Moving away from Hydro-Quebec
- Manufacturers establishing self-managing utilities (Globalfoundries was given as an example)
- Setting bigger renewable goals to address “climate emergencies”

Comments and Input:

- Manufacturer and the self managing utilities model ties into keeping electricity local and stimulating economic development
- The conflict(s) between renewable energy and affordability need to be addressed and supported through policy and programs
- Vermont experiencing record high temps, we are “out of time”

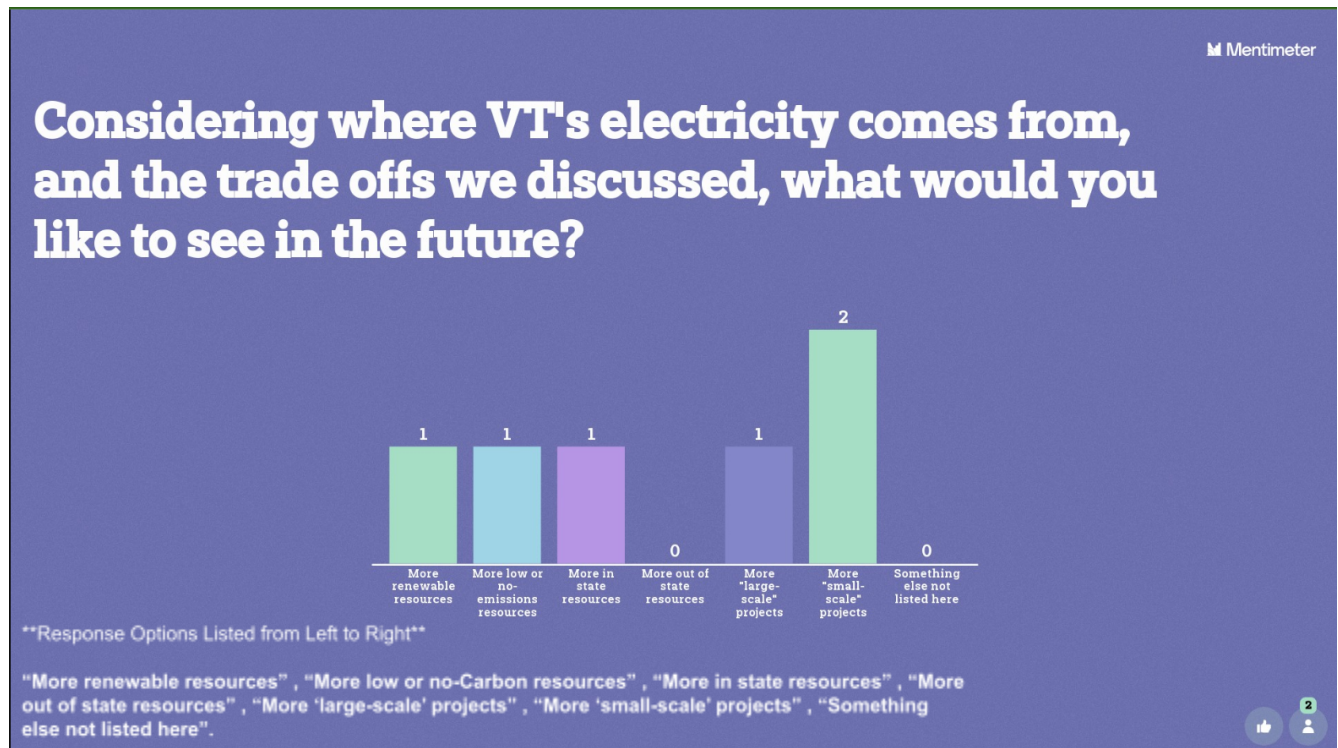
When ACRPC asked participants “**What is important to you about how you get electricity?**” all participants agreed that local generation was important to them regardless of the scale of individual projects. All responses collected in Mentimeter are shown below.



Comments and Input:

- Large or small doesn't matter, all will bring jobs and more renewables
- There should be some form of “community ownership” connected to larger-scale projects (e.g. community solar)

After discussing trade-offs associated with different types of electricity generation, ACRPC asked participants **“Considering where VT’s electricity comes from, and the trade offs we discussed, what would you like to see in the future?”** Participants most wanted to see more small-scale solar projects however, more local generation, and more low or no carbon emitting generation methods also rank very high. Below are the responses collected from Mentimeter.



Other trade offs discussed by participants included:

- Vermont’s “exportation” of negative impacts to other locations
- Land equity and indigenous peoples rights
- Other forms of GreenHouse Gas (GHG) emissions
- Environmental and social costs to new technology/generation methods

Comments and Input:

- Regarding Hydro-Quebec: VT has been Indigenous peoples have not been consulted
- Vermont exports a lot of the negative impacts from energy/electricity generation and has for some time. (REC’s, sourcing from out of state, etc.)
- Hydro power produces methane gas, should it be considered renewable/clean?

ACRPC asked participants about any barriers they have encountered, or barriers they think might arise, as we pursue the priorities and goals identified during the event. Below are the responses collected in Mentieter.



Other barriers identified included:

- Political barriers and transparency regarding climate crisis
- Policy being transparent and “forthrightly true”
- Trying to find a “0 impact solution” even though there isn’t any and this leading to no action or change being made.

What the Public Service Department Should know

The participants of this event were all white, mostly older, and were either highly educated on the subjects of discussion or worked/were involved in the field renewable energy and electricity.

The group of participants for this event was very small and many of the participants were not present the entire time (some joined late and/or left early). It was very difficult to solicit feedback and to get participants to engage in the discussion. This could be in part due to the event being hosted virtually in addition to the small group size.

Reflections on the Process

There was only 1 response to the feedback survey and it reflected a positive overall experience. This event felt more like a presentation of information to attendees and less of a group discussion. Outreach for this event was not as well planned or executed as it was for the first event and this is something that should change moving forward. For both events it was clear that attendees were already invested or involved in energy/electricity issues within their respective communities. To this end, the information being shared during the events was easily received and understood. Had there been any participants who were new to the subject of renewable energy/electricity policies and issues, it is possible that there would be challenges with accessibility. Moving forward, it would likely be beneficial for ACRPC to more specifically target other communities to gather more diverse input. It would also likely be beneficial to develop some better methods to incentivize people’s involvement in public events (e.g. stipends, child care, raffles, etc.).

Attachments

Below is the link to ACRPC’s Youtube page and the video recording of our Virtual Public Listening Event.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zcy4jW7Q6BM>