

RPC - RES Engagement Events Report

Bennington County Regional Commission

Overview

BCRC facilitated two events in late September, one in Arlington and one in Wilmington, in partnership with Windham Regional Commission. Both events were structured similarly, with the bulk of educational content delivered upfront followed by facilitated discussion. In total these events reached 16 people.

Core takeaways across both events include:

- Bureaucratic barriers—around permitting, connections with utilities, and selling/transferring credits earned through utilities—are major obstacles to widespread expansion of and access to renewable energy in Vermont
- Local energy generation is important, not just for its own sake, but for its ability to increase the reliability of electricity, improve autonomy over renewable resources, and expand local job opportunities.
- Supporting a diversity of renewable energy sources is important. Participants were interested in expanding local hydropower, wind, and solar, as well as nuclear, in pursuit of 100% clean energy.
- Addressing the climate crisis by prioritizing low-impact clean energy was a top priority for many participants, and they would be willing to make trade-offs on other issues to achieve this goal.

Approach to the Events

Event #1

Time/Date: September 21, 2023 at 5:30PM

Location: The Arlington Common, Arlington, VT

Type of Event: In-person

of Participants: 9

Comments: Took place during BCRC's bimonthly commission meeting

Event #2

Time/Date: September 27, 2023 at 5PM

Location: Wilmington Town Office, Wilmington, VT

Type of Event: In-person

of Participants: 7

Comments: Hosted in collaboration in Windham Regional Commission

BCRC held two regional events; the first event was held in Arlington as part of BCRC's bimonthly commission meeting, and the second event was held in Wilmington in partnership with Windham Regional Commission. Both events were in-person only and we used a modified version of the template workshop flow for both events. For both events, we presented the educational material upfront, and then asked participants the four main engagement questions in the second part of the event. The Arlington event was 60 minutes long, so the presentation on the RES, net-metering, RECs, and Vermont's electricity mix was quite condensed to leave more time for discussion with the participants. The event in Wilmington was about 90 minutes, but it followed the same format of sharing background information on Vermont's current energy policies and then dedicating the bulk of the event to discussions with attendees.

At our Arlington event we targeted outreach to municipal officials and energy committees and provided a light dinner at the beginning of the meeting. Greater Northshire Access Television (GNAT) filmed the event and produced a brief news segment. [The News Project – Electric Listening Tour – GNAT \(gnat-tv.org\)](#)

At the Wilmington event we targeted outreach to energy committees and the broader public. We provided light refreshments to participants and held a drawing for two raffle prizes. PSD staff member, TJ Poor, attended this event.

To advertise both events, we sent emails to our municipal contacts, energy committees, BCRC and WRC commissioners, and other stakeholder groups including the local chapters of 350 VT. We created a [page on our website](#) with information about the events, and did several Facebook posts. We posted physical flyers in several locations throughout Bennington, Wilmington, and the Northshire (northern towns in Bennington County). We also asked municipal energy committees to assist with outreach in their communities. For the Wilmington event, the town also promoted the event through Instagram and Front Porch Forum. We did not ask people to RSVP, however, we sent reminder emails to several stakeholder groups.

Event Attendance

Arlington Event: 9 participants

Wilmington Event: 7 participants

Demographics Overview

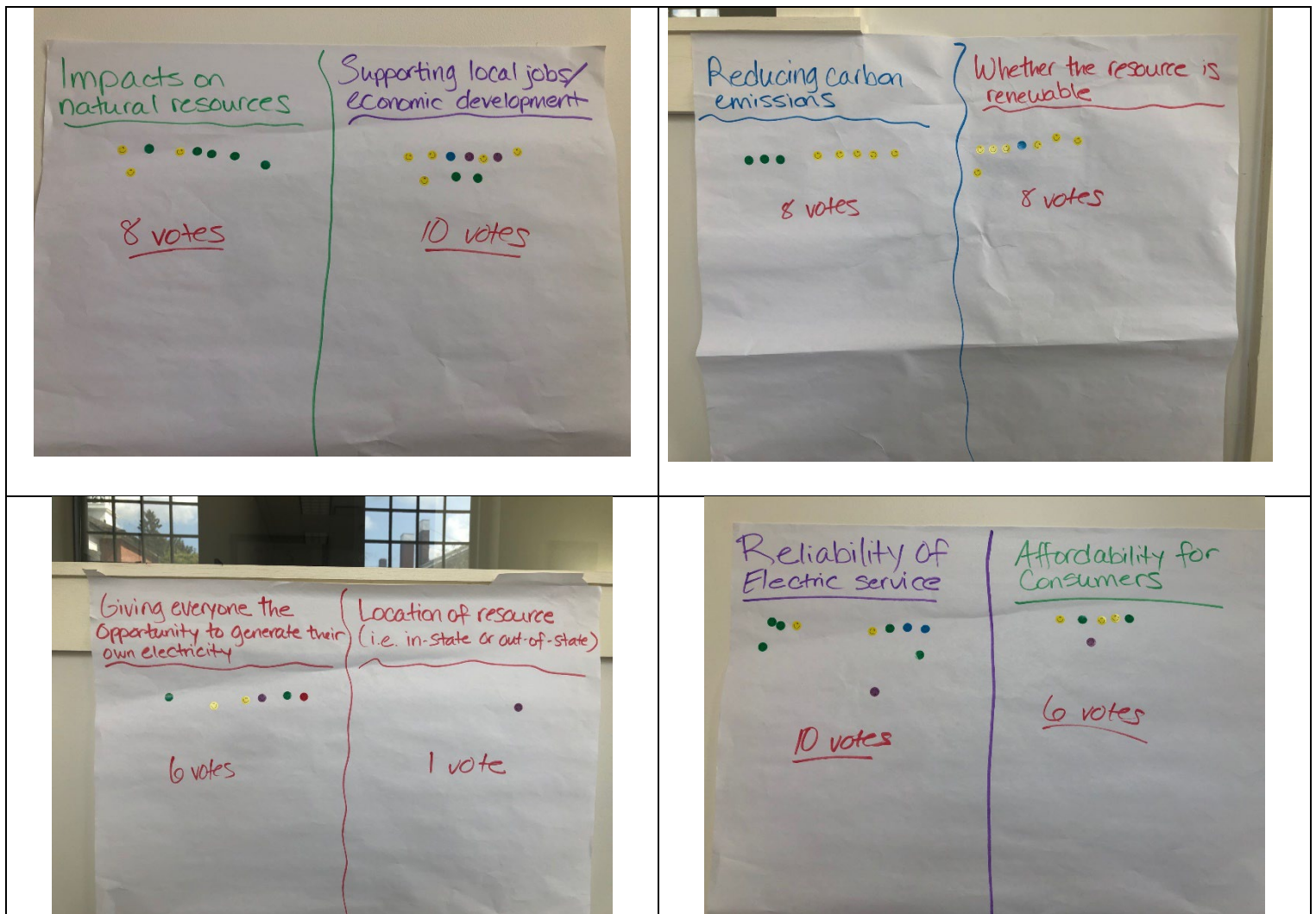
Participant demographics were similar between both events. A majority of the participants from both events identified as white and were over 60. A majority of participants also reported owning their home. All of the participants who answered the income question

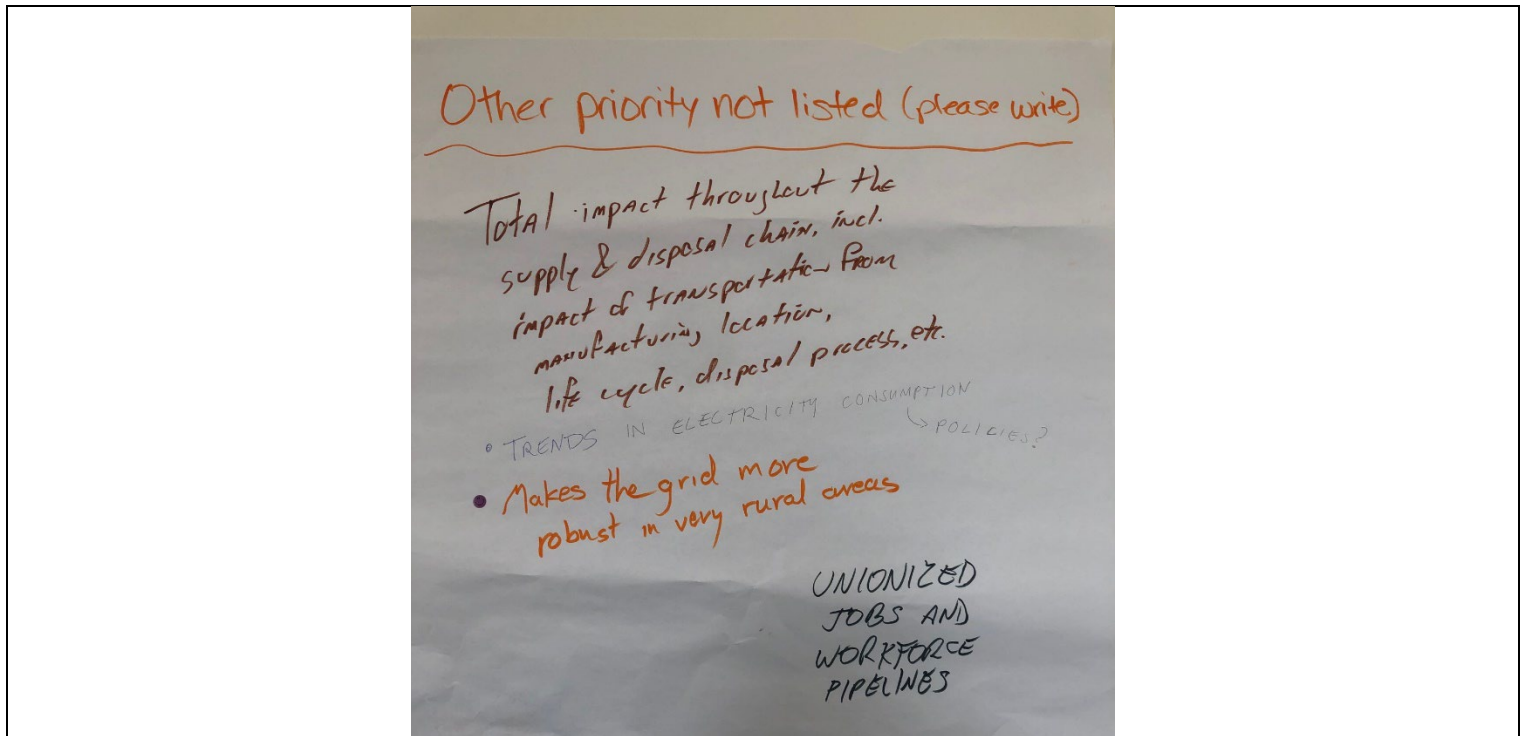
reported earning \$50,000 or more per year, with many reporting an annual income of \$100,000 or greater. Several participants indicated a municipal government affiliation. (See attached spreadsheet for detailed demographic data).

Reporting

Q1: What do you think should be prioritized when thinking about where Vermont's electricity comes from?

Arlington

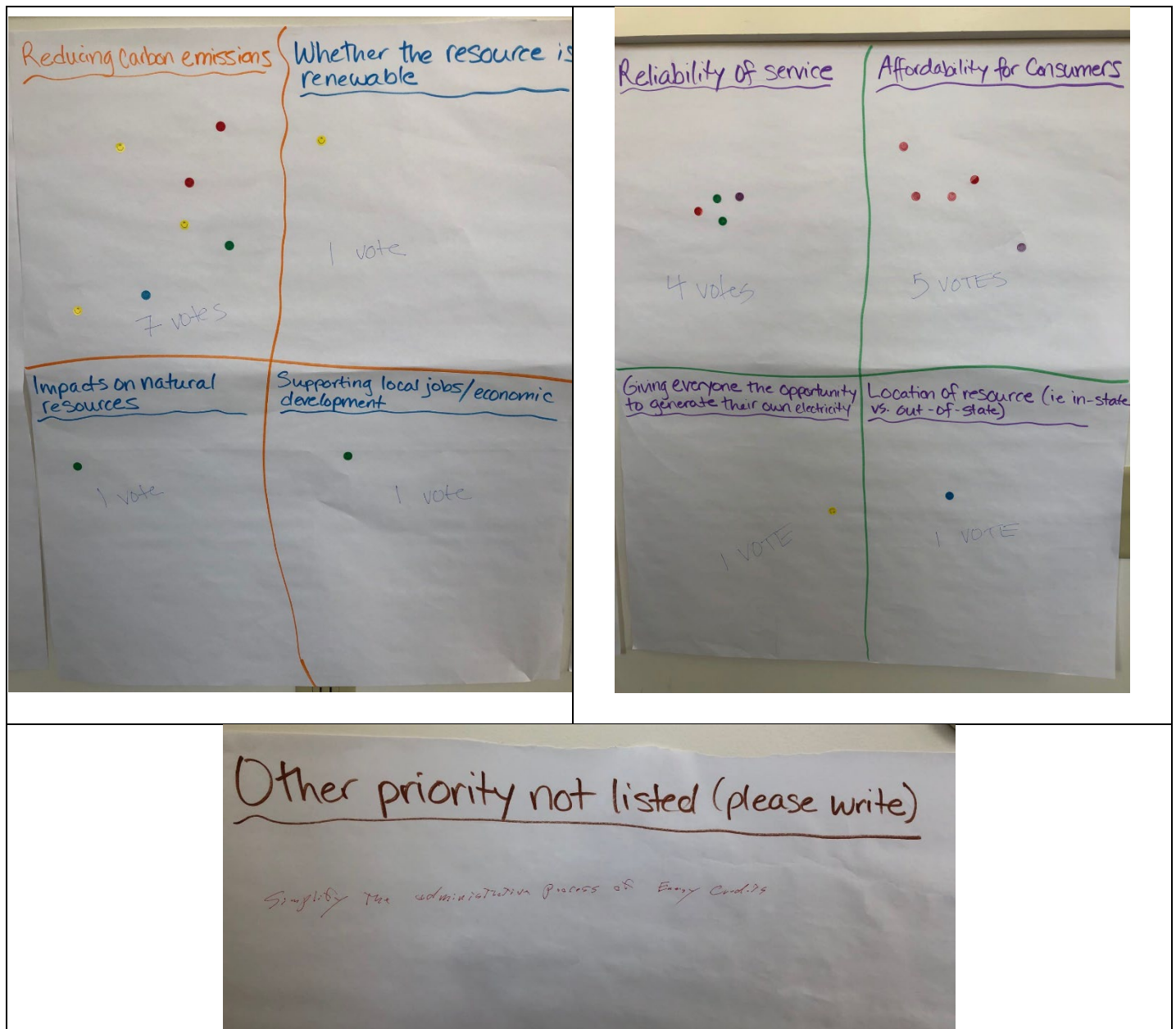




(Responses collected via dot polling – see attached photos). Numbers indicate the number of participants who voted for each priority.

At the session in Arlington, participants were given an unlimited number of dots to vote on their priorities with. As a result, most priorities received votes from most participants. The top priorities, receiving votes from all attendees, were reliability and supporting local jobs and economic development. Tied as the next most important issues, with seven out of nine votes each, were the renewability of the resource, whether it was reducing carbon emissions, and its natural resources impacts. Most participants also felt strongly that giving everyone the opportunity to generate their own electricity and affordability should be priorities. The location of the resource was the least popular, with only one vote. Participants raised additional priorities, including the robustness of electricity service in rural areas, whether the jobs created and supported would be unionized, and whether we were fully taking into account lifecycle emissions of generation sources when we considered their renewability. A conversation about affordability raised concerns about consumption habits and how to balance consumption and affordability.

Wilmington



(Responses collected via dot polling – see attached photos). Numbers indicate the number of votes for each priority.

At the session in Wilmington, each participant only had three dots with which to vote on their priorities, challenging them to be more selective. The top priority in the group was reducing carbon emissions (seven out of seven participants voted for this), followed by affordability (5/7), reliability (4/7), and all the other priorities tied at one vote apiece. One person added their own priority of simplifying the administrative process for energy credits.

Q2: In thinking about the priorities we just discussed and the policies Vermont currently has, what is important to you about how you (personally) get renewable or low carbon electricity?

Arlington

One participant started the discussion by sharing that getting renewable energy from utilities feels like it has less of a psychological impact than a program like net-metering because the information received is less tangible and too vague. The group discussed how it could be more impactful to receive more specific information/quantification from utilities to really understand where their renewable energy is coming from. One person reported that having solar panels at their house has changed their relationship with electricity, making them more aware of how much they generate and consume. Someone shared that dynamic electricity pricing in other states can lead to more awareness of conservation and help consumers be part of the solution and feel like they have a meaningful impact.

Wilmington

Many participants emphasized local generation as an important aspect of how they would like to get renewable energy. The benefits of keeping renewable generation were seen as manifold: it could be more resilient, reliable, and would be better for generating local jobs. This preference was heavily caveated by a discussion that it does not need to be 100% local at any cost—and that aesthetics, affordability, and other practicalities should be taken into account—but that we should “look local first.” The issue of autonomy was raised, too: participants expressed interest in generating more electricity in Vermont than is actually used in-state, to keep money in the Vermont economy, give us autonomy on how our electricity is obtained, and reduce reliance on other entities/countries for our energy.

One key issue was prioritizing a low impact on the environment. One participant articulated that addressing climate change first should be most important, even if that means sourcing low-impact electricity from somewhere other than Vermont. Another issue that came up included prioritizing a diversity of generation sources, without necessarily emphasizing one over another. There was some disagreement about different sources—dislike for wind because of the aesthetics—but general support for using a variety of sources to meet our goals. Cost was also discussed as an important factor to consider. Some participants discussed how the rural nature of Vermont means that it can be costly to develop the infrastructure necessary to get power to all of the people in the state. One group discussed how the upfront costs of installing renewable energy is not realistic for a lot of people, and that even with current incentives, many people cannot pay that much up front.


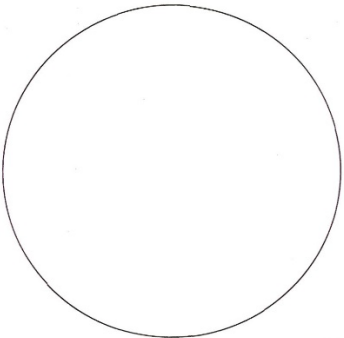
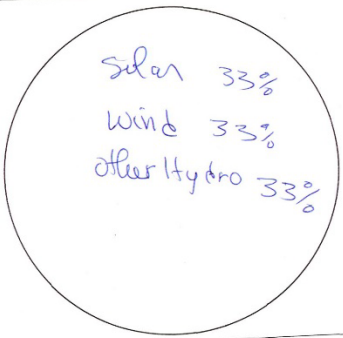
Q3: Seeing where our electricity currently comes from, what would you like this (our electricity mix) to look like in the future?

Arlington

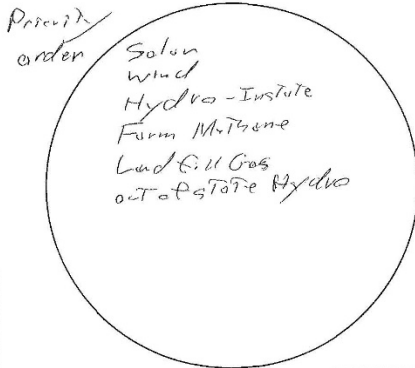
Participants expressed an interest in seeing an increased share of hydropower not from Hydro Quebec. This could be done by doing an inventory of all dams in Vermont and getting viable ones online to produce electricity; other participants suggested increasing the use of small river turbines.

A few participants indicated that they do not love biomass and feel uneasy about it being part of a clean electricity future. One participant was in favor of nuclear taking over the 10% ISO New England mix in addition to the 18% we already get from nuclear. They expressed that achieving 100% carbon-free energy is more important than the concerns around nuclear energy. Another participant suggested that we should explore nuclear fusion, not just fission.

Wilmington

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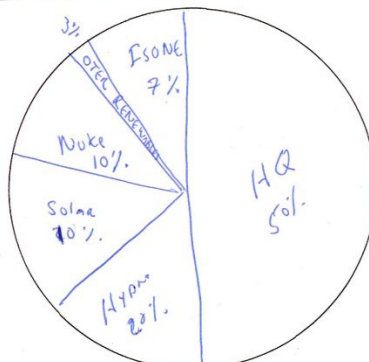
What would you like to see Vermont's energy mix look like in the future?



Percent of Mix (should add up to 100%)

Hydro Quebec 52%	Nuclear 18%
Other Hydro Power 17%	ISO New England Mix 10%
Solar 3%	Farm Methane <1%
Biomass (Wood) <1%	Landfill Gas <1%
Wind 1%	Natural Gas <1%

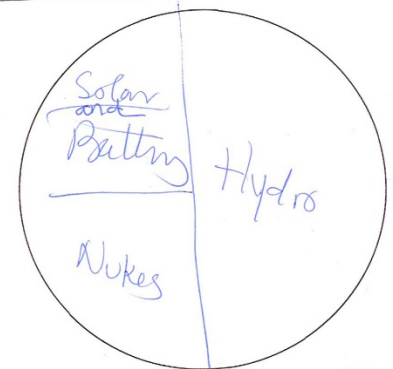
What would you like to see Vermont's energy mix look like in the future?



Percent of Mix (should add up to 100%)

Hydro Quebec 52% (50%)	Nuclear 18%
Other Hydro Power 17% (2%)	ISO New England Mix 10% (7%)
Solar 3% (10%)	Farm Methane <1%
Biomass (Wood) <1%	Landfill Gas <1%
Wind 1%	Natural Gas <1%
Total 3%	

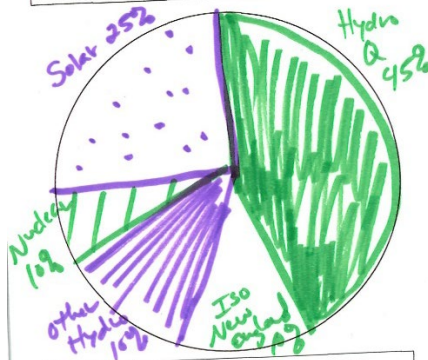
What would you like to see Vermont's energy mix look like in the future?



Percent of Mix (should add up to 100%)

Hydro Quebec 52%	Nuclear 18%
Other Hydro Power 17%	ISO New England Mix 10%
Solar 3%	Farm Methane <1%
Biomass (Wood) <1%	Landfill Gas <1%
Wind 1%	Natural Gas <1%

What would you like to see Vermont's energy mix look like in the future?



Percent of Mix (should add up to 100%)

Hydro Quebec 52% 45%	Nuclear 18% 10%
Other Hydro Power 17% 10%	ISO New England Mix 10%
Solar 3% 25%	Farm Methane <1%
Biomass (Wood) <1%	Landfill Gas <1%
Wind 1%	Natural Gas <1%

Responses for this question were collected using a pie chart drawing activity (see attachment).

For this question, participants all marked up pieces of paper with blank pie charts and references to the state's current electricity mix. Responses indicate a decrease in reliance on Hydro Quebec, significantly so in many responses, and marked increases in use of solar- and wind-generated electricity. Participants were also interested in increasing hydropower in Vermont, as distinct from Hydro Quebec. A few participants included nuclear in their mix, albeit at slightly lower shares than the current 18 percent, and one participant showed nuclear increasing. Farm methane capture was briefly mentioned as an option that a participant is curious to learn more about and seems like an opportunity for the state to look into more.

Q4: [referencing the outcomes from discussing questions 1 and 3] What are the barriers you see to achieving these outcomes with our programs and policies?

Arlington

Barriers named included complacency, the power of private actors to say yes or no, community opposition more broadly, and grid vulnerability. A few of the attendees mentioned the importance of reliable electricity, especially in their rural communities, and emphasized the need to ensure reliability throughout the grid to achieve widespread adoption of electrification. The group discussed the regulatory barriers that discourage the development of hydropower (intentionally or otherwise), and give power to these other parties to make decisions that affect entire communities. Another barrier mentioned was the lack of understanding the trade-offs between different electricity sources/lack of knowledge about this topic.

Wilmington

One of the main overarching barriers discussed was bureaucracy and the ways it impedes creation of and access to renewable resources. One main example of this was the bureaucracy of working with utilities to connect solar arrays greater than 10 kW capacity—this participant expressed that anything larger than 10 kW becomes extremely onerous and expensive in a way that is prohibitive. This participant also shared that they want a straightforward way to sell or transfer solar credits they have earned from their own array to tenants in one of their properties, but as of yet there is no simple way to do this through Green Mountain Power. This raises an enormous equity issues, leaving tenants throughout the state with no easy way to guarantee direct access to renewable energy. Renters do not have any of the self-generation options available to them because they don't own the buildings or land. How do we make renewable energy available to them? This participant shared an idea for a program in which renters would be able to buy renewable energy, perhaps even at a discount through a utility or landlord.

Another prime example of regulatory barriers was the permitting process, which many participants feel is too cumbersome. They shared that permitting takes too long and costs too much for developers, so they are choosing not to develop new sources of renewable energy generation. Participants articulated that it is not the actual regulations that are a problem, but rather the time and therefore the cost to developers to go through the process that takes on average two years to get through the permitting. There needs to be a better way to expedite permitting. A question was asked as to whether the permitting process should be the same for a regulated utility versus a private developer. The answer was yes (based on idea that the regulations aren't bad, but the time it takes to get through it is too long).

Other barriers that came up included limited availability of land, subsidized money to support development of new generation sources, and needing a unified plan to guide this work around top priorities.

Feedback

Feedback on both events was generally very positive. Respondents to the surveys either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements in almost all cases.¹ In a few instances respondents indicated a neutral position on the survey statements, with one person stating that they did not know what to expect but were happy with the resulting information, and a few people with professional experience indicating that their understanding of electricity in Vermont did not increase as a result of attending the event. One additional piece of feedback expressed was that we needed a longer advertising time to draw a larger audience to the event.

Reflections on the Process

Outreach

The outreach toolkit developed by PSD and RPCs was very helpful when promoting the events. Using the templates provided, it was easy to create region-specific posters and send email blasts, which was especially helpful given the short time we had to advertise the events. Holding our first event in Arlington as part of our bimonthly commission worked well, because we had a guaranteed audience of at least a handful of our regular commissioners that show up to every meeting. Most of the Arlington participants did not

¹ The feedback survey asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statements: "I'm happy with the amount of information presented during the event; The information presented was easy to understand and accessible; My understanding of electricity in Vermont has increased as a result of attending the event; I had the opportunity and space to ask questions and participate; The event met my expectations."

have prior knowledge of energy topics, but their responses were still very thoughtful and informative.

Having such a short timeframe to plan and advertise the events was a challenge. We began reaching out to members of BCRC's Regional Energy Committee and municipal energy committees in Bennington County in late August, and followed up with some targeted outreach to other local community groups in mid-September. If we had more time for outreach and advertising, we might have had greater attendance at the events, and had more success engaging underrepresented/marginalized communities. It is clear from the results of the demographic survey that the people we engaged through these events were primarily white, upper middle class, educated people over the age of 45 (many of whom were over the age of 60). With more time for outreach, we could have developed a more comprehensive outreach strategy that targeted underrepresented/marginalized communities and solidified partnerships with local organizations. We also could have improved our outreach to younger people through social media platforms that appeal to a younger demographic such as Instagram and TikTok, and by reaching out to schools in a dedicated and thorough approach. (We did some outreach to schools in Bennington, but did not hear back from them.)

Overall, these regional listening sessions were a great idea and this type of public engagement on energy and electricity topics should be continued, but the time between conception and execution should be much shorter. PSD first began conversations with the RPCs about this initiative over a year ago, and a variety of factors caused a delay in implementation that left very little time for planning and execution of events. Despite the delay, these events were largely successful, and the collaboration with PSD staff was very positive and productive. With more time between finalizing event content and outreach materials and actually executing the events, future engagement efforts could yield higher levels of participation, especially among marginalized Vermonters.

Educational Tools

The educational tools developed by PSD and RPCs were extremely useful and will be reference points/resources for the foreseeable future. The slide deck was a useful template to make our own, and the resource flyers were extremely helpful supplements for the public to refer to. It was also helpful to be able to direct the public to the PSD webinar series for a deeper dive into these topics.

Additional Input

We also reached out to the members of the BCRC Regional Energy Committee for written responses to these four questions. We heard back from eight members of the committee

(see full written responses in attachment). Some of the main takeaways from their feedback is as follows:

- Reducing emissions is of utmost importance, beyond location or specific type of generation source.
- Vermont should embrace its potential to generate more renewable energy than the state itself uses.
- Regulations make it too difficult to build solar and wind projects. In particular, the ability of community members who oppose local projects to halt the development of renewable energy generation facilities was identified as a major obstacle by almost every respondent.
- Respondents were generally interested in seeing less reliance on HydroQuebec and more emphasis on a diversity of renewable resources, especially wind. Respondents were supportive of solar but fear an overreliance on it, and some respondents indicated being open to nuclear if it were to mean eliminating fossil fuels.

Attachments

1. Notes
 - a. Notes_Arlington_9-21-23
 - b. Notes_Wilmington_9-27-23
 - c. BCRC Regional Energy Committee responses
2. Written and Drawn Responses
 - a. Photos of responses to Question 1 from Arlington
 - b. Photos of responses to Question 1 from Wilmington
 - c. Scans of responses to Question 3 from Wilmington
3. Survey Responses
 - a. Spreadsheet of results from demographic surveys
 - b. Spreadsheet of results from feedback surveys
 - c. Scans of demographic surveys from Arlington
 - d. Scans of feedback surveys from Arlington
 - e. Scans of demographic surveys from Wilmington
 - f. Scans of feedback surveys from Wilmington
4. Event Photos