

RPC - RES Engagement Events Reporting - Mt. Ascutney Regional Commission (MARC)

OVERVIEW / KEY TAKEAWAYS:

MARC had a table at the Reading Energy Fair in Reading, VT on September 16 from Noon until 2:45 and collected surveys from 41 people, which was 40-50% of the estimated 80 to 100 who attended the event.

MARC & Two Rivers (TRORC) also held a Listening Session at the Windsor Welcome Center in Windsor, VT on September 28 from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. There were four attendees from 4 different towns, including 3 who serve on town committees (energy, sustainability, and planning) and one member of the public.

Takeaways:

- The longer Listening Session event attracted people who are very knowledgeable about and interested in the topic, while the fair (which was offering free food from a popular vendor) attracted a broader range of people, including families. Both events were valuable in generating different types of feedback.
- See also “Core Takeaways” (below).

APPROACH TO THE EVENTS

MARC held two events - one was a standalone Listening Session event in Windsor using the workshop template, and the other consisted of tabling at a partner event in Reading and conducting a survey, using a modified (shortened) version of the survey provided by PSD. Both events were held in person.

For the standalone event, MARC partnered with the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC). The event was advertised more broadly but attracted fewer people and the people who attended were already quite knowledgeable about the topic. Participants came from Reading, West Windsor, Wilder and Hartford. Folks who attended the Listening Session were offered pizza, subs, cookies, and drinks and were entered in a raffle for a gift certificate to a grocery store.

For the Listening Session event, a “Save the Date” was sent to town officials & board members in the MARC region and energy committees in the TRORC region; the event was included in the Windsor Town Manager’s weekly newsletter, and on the facebook pages for both MARC and TRORC; MARC also posted the event on its local Front Porch Forum; the “Say Watt?” flyer was sent to energy committees in the TRORC region and to town halls and libraries in the MARC region; the flyer was also posted in South Royalton at the Public library, Chelsea Street bulletin board, food co-op, Barrister’s Bookshop, and on the VT Law School campus; in White River Junction on the bulletin board in the Tuckerbox lobby; in Woodstock at the Post office, Worthy Kitchen, and Mont Vert; in Bethel at the Town Hall, Cockadoodle Pizza, and Babe’s Bar; in Hartland on the community bulletin board outside the Hartland Diner; in Windsor at the public library, town rec center, post office, welcome center, and on the Main St. bulletin board; at the VT State College in Randolph; and at the VT Law and Graduate School.

The Reading Energy Fair was organized by the Reading Energy Committee using a Community Capacity Building mini grant from the VT Department of Buildings and General Services, through the Municipal Energy Resilience Program (MERP). The Energy Fair was targeted at the Reading community and 75% of survey respondents were from Reading, but there were also attendees from surrounding towns (Windsor, West Windsor & Weathersfield). At the Energy Fair, folks who filled out the survey were entered in a raffle for a \$50 gift certificate to the Reading Greenhouse, a popular local nursery that also carries regional dairy, meat and produce, as well as animal feed. The Reading Energy Board advertised the Energy Fair on Front Porch Forum and with lawn signs along the main roads in town.

EVENT ATTENDANCE

The Reading Energy Committee estimated that 80 to 100 people attended the Energy Fair. Forty-one filled out surveys. Just under 90% of survey respondents were white, three were Asian, Hispanic, or Middle Eastern/North African, and the remainder preferred not to answer. Half were men, half were women, and a few preferred not to answer.

As an aside, when male/female couples approached the table and I gave them my spiel, it was often the man who would reach for the survey. When I tried to hand one to the woman, she would say, “Oh, we’re together.” So I would say, “That’s okay, you can both fill one out. You may not always agree on everything.” In every case, they would laugh and say, “That’s for sure” and the woman would also fill out the survey. I think this is an important “takeaway” to consider when tabling!

Twenty of the survey respondents (51%) were 60 years old or older; twelve (31%) were between 45 and 59; four (10%) were between 30 and 44; one person was under 30, and two people preferred not to answer.

Five respondents (14%) had incomes over \$150,000; nine (25%) had incomes between \$100,000 and \$149,999; three (8%) had incomes between \$75,000 and \$99,999; two (5.5%) had incomes between \$50,000 and \$74,999; six (17%) had incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999; three (8%) had incomes below \$25,000; and eight (22%) preferred not to answer.

Thirty-four (92%) own their own home; two (5%) rent their home; and one (3%) has other living arrangements.

Eleven respondents (30%) have an advanced degree; one (3%) took some graduate courses; thirteen (35%) have a bachelor's degree; three (8%) have an associate degree; five (14%) have some college, but no degree; three (8%) are high school graduates; and one preferred not answer.

Four people attended the Listening Session.

REPORTING

Energy Fair Event

At the Reading Energy Fair, when asked to consider **how Vermont gets its electricity**, over 90% of survey respondents ranked reliability and impact on natural resources as “very important.” This was followed by

affordability (85%), reducing carbon emissions (83%), whether the source is renewable (76%), giving Vermonters the opportunity to generate their own electricity (71%), and supporting in-state jobs/economic development (61%).

Only 35% ranked whether the source is produced in-state as “very important,” 27.5% ranked in-state production as “somewhat important,” 27.5% ranked it as “not too important” and 7.5% ranked it as “not important at all.”

When pressed to choose the **single most important factor in how Vermont gets its electricity**, respondents ranked the choices as follows: other (28%), reducing carbon emissions (21%), impact on natural resources (15%), and reliability (13%). Affordability & whether the source is renewable were tied at 10%. Only 3% felt that giving Vermonters the opportunity to generate their own electricity was the most important factor, and no one ranked “supporting in-state jobs and economic development” as most important.

For the eleven people who chose “other” five did so because they couldn’t choose just one; they either choose two factors or they said, “no one issue is most important.” Two said “solar;” one said, “grid reliability and small scale generation;” two could have been categorized under “affordability” or “renewable;” and one just said “yes.”

When asked about **how they would personally prefer to get renewable energy**, 51% expressed a preference for a combination of getting electricity from their utility and generating it themselves (net metering); 21% expressed a preference for getting it entirely from their own on-site system (off-grid); 13% prefer to get their electricity from their utility; and 15% were not sure.

A few interesting comments related to this question include:

- Home systems are for the wealthy.
- As I age, I want to have resources be diversified.
- I have solar and very much like the net metering program.

When asked what they would like **the “future mix”** to look like 60% said they would like to see more electricity coming from carbon-free resources, 57.5% said they would like to see more electricity coming from renewable resources, 10% like the current mix and 10% weren’t sure. *Note: respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer.*

When asked about their **support or opposition to Vermont getting its electricity from specific sources**, 90% of respondents (somewhat or strongly) support solar; 86% support hydropower; 85% support wind; 65% support burning methane; and 51% support burning wood.

Nuclear power was the only source supported by less than 50% of respondents. There was equal support and opposition (43% each) for nuclear power.

Hydropower had the least opposition (3%), followed by solar (5%) and wind (10%). Sixteen percent were opposed to burning methane and just over 25% were opposed to burning wood.

Listening Session event

At the standalone Listening Session event, the discussion was based partly on the topics presented and partly on the interests of the participants as reflected in their questions and comments. Some themes included:

Local control & trade offs in solar array siting: Towns that have energy plans consistent with the state's climate action plan should be able to determine whether (and where) solar arrays are sited in their community. An increase in the Tier II percentage would result in more facilities being sited in Vermont communities so community benefits and questions about local participation in site selection should be taken into consideration. Is "substantial deference" sufficient? Solar array developers could be required to provide a discounted rate for low-income off-takers in the community where the array is located. Other benefits for the host community should also be considered. If local preferences conflict with state preferences, local preferences should take precedence. Example: If an array could be located in a flat open field next to a highway, or on sloping forest land (after the trees are removed) and the town prefers the open field location, the town's preference should be respected.

There was also interest in pairing community solar arrays with battery storage and micro grids, which could benefit the community where the system is located when there is an outage.

Hydropower: There was concern about the state's reliance on HydroQuebec, along with discussion about REC retirements, energy purchases, the costs and benefits of hydropower, and the state's long-term contract with HydroQuebec. There are significant federal regulatory hurdles with hydropower and impacts to natural resources, but its availability, regardless of time of day or time of year, is a plus.

Definition of renewable: There were questions about how replacement rate figures into the definition of renewable (relative to biomass) and whether geothermal is considered renewable, followed by discussion about the current technical analysis, which is looking at what would happen if biomass was no longer included in the definition. There was support for biomass if it's legitimately renewable within a reasonable timeframe. The Clean Heat Standard was mentioned relative to geothermal.

Nuclear Power: There was general support for nuclear power and a question about whether nuclear power is completely off the table in Vermont. This was followed by discussion about the Renewable Energy Standard, which is not a clean energy standard, and the six scenarios being modeled in the PSD's technical analysis – two of which include nuclear power. The benefits of nuclear power relative to emissions and availability were also discussed.

Decarbonization: Reducing carbon emissions was a high priority for the participants and the highest priority for at least one of them who said we need to decarbonize and clean up the grid, and we need 3 x the generation that we have now, so we have to encourage and incentivize nuclear power. "All clean energy options should be on the table – as much and as fast as possible – but without burdening those who can't afford it."

Storage: Incentivizing storage, and coupling renewable energy generation with storage, were also proposed.

Electric Vehicles: There was concern about the affordability of electric vehicles for people with low and moderate incomes. There was also concern about the lack of charging infrastructure for renters who live

in multi-unit housing. Discussion focused on options for charging at work, which would use up some of the excess energy produced during daylight hours, and grants for installing EV chargers at multi-unit dwellings.

Net metering: The participants were in favor of continued aggressive support for net metering, which prompted a discussion about the associated equity issues, as well as the ACRE and Solar for All programs. The participants reviewed the map of distributed solar in the state, and it was noted that most of the state's Tier II electricity comes from small solar systems. One participant expressed a wish for solar roofing tiles. There was also a request for enabling legislation that would allow towns to require rooftop solar on buildings that are included in a Planned Unit Development (PUD).

When asked **how they would personally prefer to get renewable energy**, off-grid, net metered, from their utility, or some combination, all the participants expressed a preference for some combination of self-generated and utility-provided electricity. One specifically expressed interest in a geothermal heat pump, and another expressed interest in resilience provisions for when the grid goes down.

Feedback about the Event: Three of the four participants filled out the "How did we do?" questionnaire. All agreed, or strongly agreed, that they were happy with the amount of information presented, and that the information was easy to understand. All strongly agreed that their understanding of electricity in VT increase, that they had the opportunity to ask questions and participate, and that the event met their expectations.

Comments included appreciation for opportunity to hear what is being considered and to provide feedback to guide policy, programs & proposals; appreciation for presenters taking the time to conduct a listening tour; and appreciation for "great conversation." Only negative was "program should have been better advertised."

CORE TAKEAWAYS:

Policies & Programs

Renewable Energy Standard: At the listening session, there was support for increasing the percentage of Tier II resources if towns have a greater role in siting decisions and evaluating trade-offs (e.g. sacrificing forest to build solar array; or using field for solar rather than housing – who decides?) and if the community specifically benefits from having a solar array sited in their town.

However, the energy fair survey results ranked "whether the energy is produced in-state" as the least important factor. When pressed to choose the most important factor, reducing carbon came out on top. In-state production and supporting jobs did not rank at the top for any of the survey respondents.

Solar power & net metering: At the listening session, there was strong support for solar power and net metering without burdening those who can't afford it. The energy fair survey results also supported solar power and net metering. When asked how they would prefer to get their electricity, over half of survey respondents would like to net meter and just over 20% would like to be off grid.

Support/opposition for specific resources

Nuclear power & decarbonization: At the listening session, those who want to decarbonize quickly thought nuclear power must be in the mix. They also thought it should be incentivized. No negative opinions on nuclear power were expressed at the listening session.

Results from the energy fair survey were more mixed. When pressed to choose “the single most important factor in how Vermont gets its electricity,” survey respondents who chose a single factor ranked “reducing carbon emissions” as most important. When asked about the “future mix” of electricity resources, carbon-free resources (60%) were slightly preferred over renewable resources (57.5%).

However, the survey reflected equal amounts of support and opposition for nuclear power - 43% support or strongly support it and 43% oppose or strongly oppose it. So although survey respondents support decarbonization, they don’t necessarily support achieving that goal with nuclear power.

Burning wood & the definition of renewable: At the listening session, there was some skepticism about whether biomass resources should be considered “renewable” when factoring in replacement rate.

When asked about getting electricity from burning wood, only 51% of survey respondents supported that option. The only source that garnered less support was nuclear power. Likewise, the percentage of survey respondents who oppose burning wood (25%) was exceeded only by the percentage who oppose getting electricity from nuclear power (43%).

Geothermal: People expressed interest in **geothermal** energy, both at the listening session and in the survey.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

1. To reach people who have not historically been involved would probably take partnering with organizations who regularly interact with the population that you’re trying to reach and meeting them in a familiar convenient setting, rather than inviting them to a setting that is less familiar or convenient. Maybe also piggybacking on an event that is more directly relevant to them. To do this effectively, I think we would have needed more lead time.
2. While fairs and festivals don’t allow for in-depth education and discussion, they do enable you to reach a wider audience in a low-key setting.
3. Participation incentives like raffles are probably not necessary for audiences that are already educated about, and interested in, the topic (although food is nice!) but the raffle was helpful at the Energy Fair.

ATTACHMENTS:

Summary of survey results

Notes from listening session

Copies of 3 “How did we do?” surveys from listening session