

## **Northwest Regional Planning Commission (NRPC) RES Engagement Events Reporting**

### **Overview:**

NRPC created two outreach events that aimed at reaching different groups. One event was a fully virtual, lunchtime meeting that was aimed at energy committee members and had around 10 attendees. One was tabling in person at the Swanton Energy Fair, which had around 30 attendees.

### **Core Takeaways:**

- -The conversation around energy production couldn't be had without discussing parallel topics like geothermal, weatherization, and building codes. This seemed at least in part because RECs are a complicated topic that didn't seem fully grasped by attendees, even at the energy committee specific meeting. Educational tools were helpful, though they were such a light overview of the complex topic that more in-depth educational material for each subtopic would be helpful for next time.
- Community health and carbon intensity were the two most important factors for the attendees of the energy committee specific meeting. Reliability, affordability, and reduced carbon emissions were the most important factors for the energy fair attendees, with reliability being the most highly prioritized.
- What energy generation technologies should be pursued was hotly debated, the drawbacks of all of them gave people pause. Nuclear was generally disliked and feared. Wood for electricity was also a less popular option.
- Renewable energy that was available year-round was a priority, specifically run-of-the-river hydro and biodigesters.
- When asked if they wanted to produce their own renewable energy or get it from their utility, 20% of people preferred each option respectively, while most people (53%) preferred whatever was most cost effective.

### **Event Details:**

For our virtual meeting, we had around 10 attendees from Swanton Energy Committee, Saint Albans Energy Committee, NRPC's Regional Energy Committee, and Walk Bike Saint Albans. The group ranged in age from around 35 to 65, and we were lucky to have attendees from healthcare, local government, utilities, disability rights work, and other fields. It took place on October 10<sup>th</sup> from 12-1PM. We used the PSD slides to guide the conversation, and were able to stay within an hour as it was a relatively small group that respected each other's time and spoke in short turns. The conversation was in-depth though struggled to stay on topic. It seemed attendees wanted to discuss energy topics such as geothermal, building codes, EVs, weatherization, and other topics they felt more comfortable with. Because this event was specifically targeted at energy committees, we did not advertise it widely but instead sent it directly to all energy committee members in the region. While attendees had different ideas about what sources they wanted their energy to come from, a few themes became apparent. Clean and renewable

energy was considered of the utmost importance, and the equity concerns and health impacts of energy production must be considered. There was great concern for the impacts out of state and out of country energy sources are having on the communities and habitats they're located in. There was also a general lack of interest in wood as a renewable or clean energy source, as there was concern for both particulate matter and forest preservation. Nuclear also received an almost unanimous reaction of fear and confusion. The current state of Vermont Yankee as well as increasing global tensions were cited as the root of that. Ensuring we have renewable energy year-round was a large point of discussion, and this led to a favorable view on run-of-the-river hydro, wind, and biomass digesters like those located on farms.

The second event was meant to reach a broader audience. The Swanton Energy Fair, held at the Swanton Village Complex on Saturday, October 21<sup>st</sup> from 11-2, was a mix of energy expert tabling and fun, including a smoothie bike, treats, giveaways, and a touch a truck event. Unfortunately, the weather was poor so the event wasn't as well attended as expected. Luckily, around 30 people attended and many engaged in long, informative conversations with presenters. We advertised across social media including Facebook and Front Porch Forum, and shared it widely with the contacts of Swanton Energy Committee and NRPC. We also put up posters at the MVU craft fair that happened the same day close by. With informational sheets on display and with printed copies of both the energy policy survey and the demographic survey as well as QR codes to take both surveys online, most attendees engaged with the listening session either informally by looking at the informational sheets and giving me their general opinions, or by taking the surveys. Paper surveys were the preferred method. The surveys were based largely on the PSD survey questions though we added an option of "whatever is most cost effective" when asking people to choose how they preferred to get their renewable energy. 53% of people ended up choosing "whatever is most cost effective", so clearly affordability is a key factor in energy discussions. We were lucky to get attendees with a wide range of lived experiences. We had renters and homeowners; attendees who currently or previously worked in the energy field as well as attendees who are interested primarily in financial savings; attendees who have never attended a municipal or state run event as well as some who have led such events. 15 people filled out surveys but others chose to speak casually with me about their opinions and those have been captured in the core takeaways.

	STRONGLY SUPPORT	SOMEWHAT SUPPORT	SOMEWHAT OPPOSE	STRONGLY OPPOSE	NOT SURE	TOTAL
Burning wood and other plant material (biomass)	6.67% 1	33.33% 5	26.67% 4	20.00% 3	13.33% 2	15
Burning methane gas from landfills or farms (biomass)	26.67% 4	26.67% 4	6.67% 1	20.00% 3	20.00% 3	15
Hydropower	69.23% 9	23.08% 3	7.69% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	13
Nuclear	7.14% 1	42.86% 6	7.14% 1	28.57% 4	14.29% 2	14
Solar	86.67% 13	6.67% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	6.67% 1	15
Wind	80.00% 12	13.33% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	6.67% 1	15

The survey showed that hydro, solar, and wind have high levels of support in the region.

	VERY IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	NOT TOO IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL	I DON'T HAVE AN OPINION	TOTAL
Reliability of electric service	93.33% 14	6.67% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Affordability for consumers	73.33% 11	26.67% 4	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Impact on natural resources like forests, rivers, and wildlife	80.00% 12	20.00% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Supporting jobs and economic development in the state	40.00% 6	53.33% 8	6.67% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Reducing carbon emissions that cause climate change	73.33% 11	26.67% 4	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Whether the source is renewable	73.33% 11	26.67% 4	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Giving all Vermonters the opportunity to generate their own electricity on-site	53.33% 8	26.67% 4	20.00% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Whether the source is produced in-state	13.33% 2	66.67% 10	20.00% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15

This visual of responses to the question “how important should each of the following be when considering how Vermont gets its electricity” highlights a key issue we found throughout this process: Residents highly prioritize affordable, reliable, energy that is renewable and/or low carbon and does not negatively impact natural resources. It seemed like compromising any one of these factors felt like a big hurdle, and attendees were largely unable to choose one of these drawbacks over another.

### Process Reflections:

- More time for planning and collaborating, as well as timing this for the summer would have led to a more robust line up of existing community events to partner with

- Focusing on a more specific piece of the policy might have made it more digestible for people and gotten more specific feedback. There seemed to be a feeling that commenting on such a large, technical system was a bit out of people’s comfort zone.

- Glad to see demographic survey questions about education level, income, homeowner status, though the material could benefit from the addition of a question about comfort in a municipal or state setting. These key demographics can often be overlooked but they really help to build out our understanding of who is engaging and how we can meet people where they are.