

EmPOWERing NM, Community Conversation

6.8.23 Silver City, NM

Convention Center- Silver City Grant County Chamber of Commerce

Overview

EPSCoR New Mexico spent 5-years building a SMART Grid Center to research, mentor and train the next generation of engineers to modernize the grid using microgrid technologies. As part of that effort, they want to build a deeper understanding of the level of interest in communities across New Mexico in new technologies and what implications it would mean for rural communities, low-income and communities of color. EPSCoR partnered with Noble Renewables Group LLC, and Community Connects Consulting LLC to design and facilitate 5 community conversations across New Mexico (Farmington, Las Vegas, Silver City, Carlsbad and Tribes and Pueblos) to learn with and from community about how the concept of micro-grids fit with community beliefs, values, and readiness. This series of conversations comes at a time when the state and federal policy landscape and energy landscape are rapidly changing in recognition of climate change and impacts, an aging energy infrastructure, and the need to consider how to engage frontline communities in the critical questions and problem solving about their current energy situation, access, affordability, and the future. As the need for policy and system changes elevates now is the time to engage those being affected most in a meaningful way.

The Structure of Conversations

Participants gather in solidarity to talk and converse about energy equity. The root of which is only about a decade old but can be traced to environmental justice that has been going on for decades related to social justice. Today it's recognized as "Climate justice is racial justice" and "Indigenous justice is environmental justice".

Historically, the energy system has consistently (through not exclusively) been a source of inequities. The present inequities that accrued over many decades will grow and persist without actions to actually reverse inequities. The energy savings from energy efficiency, solar, and vehicles, for instance, continue to provide financial returns and generate wealth for those households, disproportionately white and higher income, that were able to take advantage of special government and utility incentives that were mostly not accessible to people of color and lower incomes. Reversing energy inequities is possible at any time, provided there is a willingness to shift the underlying structures.

The goal of the community conversations is to prepare vulnerable communities for a statewide town hall meeting on August 8th and 9th which stakeholders from across New Mexico will build an analysis, consensus and make recommendations about the systems and policy change

strategies needed that will best position New Mexico communities for a healthier more just energy present and future. One potential policy area might highlight that our state does not have an energy roadmap to address equity to map out inequities and how to advance equity by utilizing metrics as we move toward 100% renewables.

At the Las Vegas meeting two facilitators, Theresa Cardenas and Lilly Irvin-Vitela, helped community participants understand their own unique definition of equity. A clear understanding of equity is intended to create a shared understanding and language, to guide the development of the conversation toward equity targets, goals and best practices. Once we have guiding principles it helps assess questions about equity/inequities, setting targets and measurements and therefore, better prepared to make recommendations such as directing the necessary resources to access clean energy.

When we converse about equity, we begin with three pillars.

1. Recognizing – Who is vulnerable, who is privileged, and how?
2. Asking – Who is at the table and what voice and power do they have in influencing planning, decision making, and implementation? Who bears the brunt of the burdens, and who benefits, and how?
3. Restorative – How can we rectify past injustices caused by the energy system and prevent future harms?

Silver City, New Mexico

Silver City, New Mexico is a rural mountain community that has produced copper for the country. Neighboring the 3.3 million acre Gila National Forest and the high desert, this community is on the front-line of climate impacts. The Gila fire in 2022 is testament to the level of risk.

Prior to the community conversation, participants watched a 15-minute video moderated by Dr. Selena Connealy, EPSCoR Associate Director, about micro-grids and technology advances and what it might mean for the energy future of their communities.

Discussion Responses

Why is this issue important to you?

- Retired from a career of working to serve people experiencing homelessness, poverty, and trauma. Access to safe and affordable energy is part of helping a community to be healthy and strong.
- Was curious and believes the community needs to know more.
- Lived in Silver City for 40 years and engaged in various civic groups including New Energy Economy and St. Francis Newman Center. Care for the environment and access

to safe and affordable energy is a strong faith issue. "We need to take care of the planet and each other. I have a love for my community and the planet."

- The politics around oil and gas is overwhelming. Renewables are important and meeting to share information helps with mitigation.
- The science and technology have improved around renewables since the 70s but policy has not kept pace.
- Serves as a County Commissioner and "policy suggestor" and has cared about and worked on renewable energy as someone who studied physics and as an advocate for decades.
- Care about this as an economic development issue. Access to safe and affordable energy impacts housing development and how to rehabilitate housing.
- More vulnerable populations including elders and people with low incomes in rural communities with less access to support are especially hard hit.
- Access to weatherization and renewable energy is harder depending on home ownership and the condition of housing. Often people who are most in need of support can't access support or incentives.
- Water systems and wastewater systems are threatened by lack of reliable access to power. This is a threat to community health and safety.
- Access to safe and affordable power is an emergency response issue.
- Concerned that rural and remote communities are at a disadvantage in renewable energy implementation because of baseline infrastructure, ability to meet federal match requirements, grant writing burden, and lack of workforce development for the people who would implement these new technologies.

What did you know or learn about micro grids today that sounds promising?

- Just learning more about what microgrids are and how they work.
- The potential for more energy independence as communities, families, businesses.
- Potential for more local choice.
- More realistic approaches to energy security.
- See parallels in Grant County water systems.
- Like the idea of local/regional job creation and opportunities for youth and young families with micro-credentials.
- In on the conversation now vs. 5 years later when we're playing catch up after being left behind.
- Potential to push for solar, wind, etc. and push public utilities to really be a public service.
- Currently limited to 200 megawatts but there is massive supply potential in homes, cars, businesses.
- We could require that 30% of energy be allocated to people with low incomes or provide rate breaks.
- We need more affordability and more options.

What principles or values do we want to see at work in the energy system?

- Investing in renewable energy should be government funded from home-to-home and not just for low-income people.
- Push funding agencies to understand that eligible activities around renewables may need to look different in rural/remote communities because baseline capacity and infrastructure is different than urban areas.
- People with the most inefficient appliances have the least money and may end up being higher energy users. Rate structures that are only based on use create further disadvantages for people who are in poverty.
- Helping businesses that create environmental challenges be a part of the solution. For example, the roof tops of big box stores have enough space to host solar panels to produce energy for neighborhoods/towns. Maybe this is part of how they mitigate some of their negative environmental impacts.
- Affordability should be a guiding principle.
- We've had geothermal capacity for over 30 years.
- Use what exists and is working well and incentivize families and businesses that use renewable energy but be careful with incentives to not give away the tax base.

Please describe the energy injustice and inequities we face in this region.

- Related to affordability, the following inequities were identified:
 - Need to promote more local co-ops.
 - the capital requirements to move forward with improvements and conversion to renewables is often cost prohibitive.
- Related to clean energy, the following inequities were identified:
 - PNM only uses 7-8% renewables.
 - Avangrid is a threat to our energy future and is not transparent.
 - PNM has not been transparent to consumers about decisions and the impacts.
 - We need local choice energy.
 - Concerns about reliance on the Permian basin and the economic, environmental, and community impacts of imported labor, exported wealth, and health and safety impacts.
- Related to workforce development and jobs, the following inequities were identified:
 - worry about the short and long-term health and safety risks of jobs in the energy sector.
 - Need to take guidance from the principles outlined in the Energy Transition Act about jobs in a just transition.
 - 10-15 years we were prepping in this region for job training around geothermal and solar. What happened?
 - There's not enough investment in vocational education.
 - Challenges with the capital outlay process, when money becomes available, and how quickly it must be used or reverted. This makes it harder in places that have been underinvested in to make real gains.

Are you aware and do you have access to data to help us quantify these inequities?

- No specific sources referenced.

What are the structural issues in the energy system that contribute to injustice/inequity/harm?

- Some of the financial issues identified include:
 - Lack of investment back into communities
 - Tension between a public good that is operating within private, for-profit business models.
 - There is a potential for more municipal co-ops but not enough exist.
 - Programs that assist homeowners miss renters and don't always engage landlords.
 - Rentals need to be more energy efficient, but this requires investment and in a housing shortage, there is not a financial incentive to do the right thing.
- Some of the regulatory issues identified include:
 - Concern about the ethics/politization of the PRC.
 - Self-interest can stand in the way of the public good.
 - Regulatory decision-making needs to be more transparent.
- Some of the policy issues identified include:
 - The role of money in politics and perceived conflicts of interest.
 - Lack of political will and courage to support renewables over oil and gas interests.
 - Aging housing stock and reliance on firewood, propane, and natural gas.
 - Consider a renewable energy Corp to support a just transition.

How would we remediate them?

- Frame a reliable grid that can operate as a whole system or as a islanded system as the disaster preparedness and National Security issue that it is. Use 1/3 of the national defense budget to modernize the grid and build infrastructure for micro grids across the country including rural and remote area communities.
- We need policy makers to understand and be educated on how implementation would really work in rural and remote area communities.
- In New Mexico, sometimes statewide planning strategies are narrowly focused on highly populated areas and strategies don't make sense in areas with lower population density.
- Consider implementation of micro grids at Senior Centers across NM.

Power Mapping

Decision Makers

- The Public Regulatory Commission
- The Governor's Office
- County Commissions
- City Councils
- The State Legislature through enabling legislation and appropriations

- Federal Agencies like the Economic Development Administration, the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Defense, The National Forest Service, the Department of Energy, or any agency managing public lands/facilities.

What levers does the community have to intervene?

- Pass legislation requiring each state agency to develop micro grid goals.
- Make energy a required element in local comprehensive planning.
- Work to educate faith communities like Interfaith Power and Light and the Ministerial Alliance to mobilize around energy issues and micro grids as a justice and care for each other and the earth ministry.
- Create a "trunk show" about micro grids to take to k-12 schools to educate youth about the issues, science, and job opportunities associated with developing and maintaining safe and affordable access to energy.
- Help local elected officials understand how local generation and distribution a security, safety, and economic development issue is.

What tools, tactics, and narratives can inspire others in the community to get involved?

- Take a cross generational approach and focus on engaging youth and elders.
- Emphasize the value of local generation and distribution to front-line communities.
- Build local government capacity to provide education on these issues. A paid position in City and County governments that focus on safe and renewable energy could support comprehensive planning and implementation as well as outreach and education.
- There are trust issues because of historical and present-day energy inequities.
- Develop fact sheets that are visually oriented and videos to highlight successful projects and what works. Local examples would be best.
- Understand that safe, affordable, and locally controlled energy keeps money associated with energy production and distribution locally.
- Always follow the money to know who is making energy decisions and who is benefiting.

What is our ask to decision makers?

- Stop hydrogen, it's a false solution.
- Stop carbon capture, it's a false solution.
- Pass community solar legislation.
- Pass local choice legislation.
- Invest in training and workforce development.

What are our highest priorities for action?

- Local choice energy
- Education
- State or grant funded positions for a local training and technical assistance provider
- Building buy-in with governments and the general public

- Implementing community solar using solar farms- look at LANLs approach

Other Ideas

- Build support for local governments to lead the way in transitioning to renewable and safe energy.
- Encourage local governments to use electric vehicles.
- Make eligibility for implementation grants align with the sale of rural and remote communities too.
- Develop a passenger train from Silver City to Las Cruces.
- Use county building roof space to generate electricity.
- Use solar in government parking lots as demonstration projects.