

# EmPOWERing NM, Community Conversation

## 4.22.23 Farmington NM, San Juan Community College

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### Overview

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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 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 to learn with and from community about how the concept of microgrids 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 future. As the need for policy and system changes elevates now is the time to engage those being effected 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 anytime, provided there is a willingness to shift the underlying structures.

The goal of the community conversations are to prepare vulnerable communities for a statewide town hall meeting in 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. Our state does not have an energy roadmap to address equity by

mapping out inequities and how to advance equity by utilizing metrics as we move toward 100% renewables.

At the Farmington 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?

## Guiding Questions

- Why is this issue important to you?
- What did you hear this morning or come in knowing that seems promising for your community to address inequities?
- What guiding principles do we want to see established in the energy system?
- What is the extent of energy inequities we face? Is it affordability, clean energy access, access to clean energy job training?
- Are you aware and have access to data to help us quantify these inequities?
- What are the structural issues in the energy system (financial, regulatory, policy) that have and continue to contribute to these inequities?
- How would we remediate them?
- Power mapping – who are making energy decisions that impact us?
- What specific powers do they have and what maintains those forms of power?
- What levers do we have to intervene?
- What tools, tactics, and narratives would inspire our community members to action?
- What do we want from people in power?
- What are our asks?
- If we must start somewhere, what are our highest priorities?

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## Farmington New Mexico

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Farmington, New Mexico is a community that has been hard hit by New Mexico's and the US's energy policy. An area rich in culture and natural resources, Farmington has experienced the

boom-and-bust cycles of extractive approaches to energy production and distribution going back decades. The following report outlines the perspectives of community stakeholders who participated in the first Farmington community conversation on 4.22.23 at the San Juan Community College. The majority of participants were born and raised in New Mexico and 75% of participants were Dine. Participants are mothers, fathers, grandparents, educators, homemakers and farmers. Parents have worked in the oil and gas fields. Two participants had moved away from their native home land to be near aging parents and then returned to find environmental degradation. One participant had a public health lens. Memories were shared about their homes without running water and electricity. Dine language at times was spoken during this conversation.

Prior to the conversation participants listened to a 15 minute video with Dr. Selena Connealy about micro-grids and technology advances what it might mean to their communities.

## Discussion Responses

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### Why is this issue important to you?

- Believe that people most impacted should be at the center of decision-making about energy and help shape systems and policies to increase fair and just approaches.
- Concerned about the impact of a failing energy grid on food production, distribution and storage.
- Concerned about community health both in terms of the burden of securing energy disproportionately impacting people with lower incomes.
- Also worry about the impact on clinics, hospitals, and people using oxygen or other medical devices at home when the grid fails periodically with rolling brown outs or for good.
- Concerned about how energy impacts access to water.
- Come from a family with a culture that is deeply connected to the land and water and passionate about her connection to the land.
- Want to better understand how we survive and thrive with a failing grid.
- Curious about what the research from EPSCoR and community perspectives point us toward in terms of safe and well-paying jobs in renewables.
- Interested in renewable energy options such as solar.
- Believe in empowerment through art and the use of art to help build community and promote community ideas and solutions around challenging issues. This is an especially important strategy to engage youth and Indigenous people.
- Interested in how the micro-grids might increase self-sufficiency and self-determination and move Indigenous people into a healthier relationship with energy production, distribution, and consumption.
- See a pattern in energy of still fighting some of the same challenges and of 60 years ago.
- Fossil fuels are finite and may be necessary for certain things and should be used for those limited things while using wind and solar for other needs. Drilling and fracking

cause a lot of damage to people and our environment.

- This is related to other environmental issues like helium and hydrogen. We need to think about the impacts not just immediate gain for some people. Especially concerned about environmental health and the use of sacred water resources.
- The Navajo Nation has been a national sacrifice zone and others in the state and country have benefited while Navajo people have had to live with the environmental, health, and economic harms.
- The economic benefit to the Navajo Nation from extraction has been pennies on the billions of dollars and has left people with less health and wealth, no access to running water and electricity.
- Our communities are still reeling from Uranium mining and the contamination to land and water. Clean-up efforts have been minimal and ineffective.
- Even proposed "green" approaches need to be considered. Carbon capture for example is putting excess carbon into our earth, not sure of the long-term results.
- Deep concern about the public health impacts of how we create and use energy.
- Farmington is homeland and an area steeped in history and legacies. We are threatened and harmed by extraction without community input.
- Care about the relationships between people and nature.
- We need to not only look at bio markers but also the social and structural determinants of health.
- Understand that we are a part of a global system and these decisions impact health, migration, economics.
- Look to the Centers for Disease Control statement on structural racism to evaluate policy decisions about energy.
- We need a political context to make recommendations such as public health impacts.

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

- There is a shared passion for the environment, connection to the land/places we've grown up. Many people are parents thinking about our children and grandchildren and beyond ourselves.
- There is an understanding that how we grow up impacts our potential and access to education and options.
- There is power and hope in teamwork and sharing our voices and working together to create changes. This keeps us from being uneducated and fearful. It allows more people to be unafraid, share their voices, and look for options. Conversations or gatherings like this add up.
- I'm glad there are organizations and people who want energy to be more sustainable and to have grids that are safe and sustainable for future generations.
- I'm excited to be at a time when we're working to transition to safer, cleaner, renewable energy.
- I know we need to be prepared for pushback from fossil fuel industry.
- There is so much to learn. We each need to learn and share what we know to educate others. We can take what we're learning and have information sessions at Chapter Houses

on Navajo land and really think about how we communicate this in Dine and translate technical terms.

- If we continue to collaborate and educate each other, we can come up with solutions and better ways to influence and inform leaders.

### **What did you know or learn today that gives you hope for addressing energy injustices?**

- We know that in the past policy and solutions kept certain sectors out. This drives resources and opportunities to benefit some. There are power differentials and we are aware of them.
- We know our history and that other communities have capitalized on resources in the Navajo Nation.
- We need more community research to analyze policy, how it's made, who it benefits and who is harmed.
- Current technology cannot support the kind of life people need but it's a vicious cycle and we're dependent on it for our livelihoods. Getting to the goal of 100% clean energy by 2040 seems to have a gap between the goal and ways to get there.
- Like the micro grid idea of energy at a neighborhood scale using wind or solar.
- There are examples of microgrids being effective in other countries. Traveling in Mongolia there were windmills, solar panels, and battery storage in very remote areas.
- Harnessing the experiences of older people and enthusiasm of younger people and doing things intergenerationally. There are things both can teach and learn from each other to come up with and work toward solutions. We have to be patient with each other and make sure youth are empowered. The use of many gifts including artists are important.
- We need to make sure that safe and affordable technologies get to the communities that suffer the burden of historical and ongoing degradation to soil, water, air, people. We need to do that in a way that shifts power and makes sure community is helping decide what will come next.
- We need to include youth. We need more access to education for our youth.
- We know that pattern of big corporations that can extract from the land and not be held accountable for clean-up. This doesn't just happen here. It happens all over the country and the world. Through communities working together, passing and enforcing legislation, we can hold corporations accountable.
- We know how to think about environmental impacts.
- There are structural issues on the Navajo Nation where people who have clout shape environmental policies and direction. But those people are under the pressure from the US government, the State, and businesses who want our natural resources.
- We need to look at where our power really is with our treaty rights.
- We need to preserve what is left for future generations.

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

- Clean energy- minimize our carbon footprint. This is a responsibility for individuals and industry. Each person has a responsibility to live minimally.

- Responsible consumption- teach people how to be more responsible about how we use energy, what kind of demand we're creating, and how to be less wasteful. We need to live on less and practice the principles of reusing and not throwing things away that take energy to make. We have to change our expectations to adapt and survive. It requires greater simplicity.
- Understand the environmental burden of disease- the cost of keeping people healthy is not distributed equally. Data about health impacts is suppressed and not everything that needs to be measured or counted is. We need better measures for health outcomes related to energy policies and practices. If people say a certain technology has better health outcomes, how do they prove that? Need to look at physical and psychological health impacts of energy policies and practices. There is so much harm and trauma related to energy choices.
- Transparent communication- this is important around decision-making about energy creation and distribution. For example, Avangrid is producing 1 gigawatt of energy to balance PNM's loss of coal. How is that impacting communities outside of NM too? People need to be connected to be protected. If we can learn from each other and communicate, we can know what to do and not to do.
- Dine Fundamental Law- shouldn't use it to benefit corporate entities that don't really benefit communities for the long-term. We need to think about who pays for the impacts on the people and broader ecological system.
- Health skepticism- we were told there would be better living through coal. There will be jobs. People will have refrigerators and stoves. There are still people without refrigerators and stoves. There was never a conversation of what would be left behind. "We were promised a great future but it didn't pan out."
- Prioritize healthy outcomes- we need to consider how every decision impacts our own health and the health of future generations.
- Consider the energy landscape- we cannot just look at our own area. We need to look at communities that are coal impacted and prioritize the transition to other energy sources. We need tax rebates that are not just beneficial to the rich. We have to educate and be educated by community because there is a lot of information. Political engagement can shape a better energy landscape that leads to better public health and use of all of our resources including water.

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

- An overarching structural issue is the Navajo Nation's holding land in trust and how that impacts the ability to get infrastructure in place.
- Excited for the future possibilities but concerned about tribal challenges and changes.
- Concerned about the language barriers to advancements in technology and training a new work force to work out in rural areas bringing along unsafe working conditions and general safety.
- Convening tribal leadership to address equity issues.
- Inequities exist because we don't analyze policies in terms of the health outcomes they will produce and the impact on ecosystems and health services.
- Where is the accountability from Secretary Haaland?

- Research can be unfair if used before looking closely at existing and proposed policy.
- Dine fundamental law, how is it being used?
- Some issues connected to affordability include:
  - If you don't own land or have home ownership, you don't have equity.
  - Even if you own a home and on the grid you can't install RE and sell back to the power company.
  - People pay higher rates for energy- example one participant described paying \$130 a month for energy and they're just 10 miles from the solar energy plant that extracts solar energy to benefit other communities.
  - NTUA has a monopoly and people are not allowed to put energy back on the grid through solar or they will be cut off from the grid.
  - People have no say in rate increases and are left to deal with the impacts.
  - As jobs emerge for renewable energies, people need more education
  - Where is the PRC in all of this? Can they intervene on affordable causes if agreements include NM?
  - Affordability, safety and jobs are all intertwined.
- Some issues raised connected to safety include:
  - Energy policy doesn't address health impacts adequately, remember how long it took to pass RICA.
  - There isn't a working EPA on the Navajo Nation or Public Regulation Commission which takes away safeguards.
  - Health systems and services are impacted by energy decisions.
  - New jobs and new industries bring new people to vulnerable communities. NM has among the highest rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women and relatives. This increases around extractive industries. Over 90% of perpetrators are not from the communities of the victims/survivors and their families.
  - Worker conditions are often poor and access to health care is limited or non-existent. People are working 12 hour shifts and it's not even questioned.
  - Union is not doing anything to protect workers.
- Some issues raised connected to jobs include:
  - There may be jobs now but no support for what's next as technologies change
  - The price for jobs now is often dangerous clean up later and those are high risk jobs that threaten health.
  - People work in short and long-term dangerous jobs with high risk of illness or harm and long hours but there seems to be an attitude of working people to death because they're replaceable.
  - Even when people know there is some risk, which isn't always the case, they're trying to survive and support their families today.
  - These jobs don't have adequate regulation/oversight, compensation, or benefits.
  - Corporations seem to find legal ways to get cheap labor.
  - People need to be educated and supported to look at safer options.
  - People are often worried about speaking up to voice concerns or threats because they still need to take care of themselves and their families.

- Community must stay involved to uplift voices and change policies. Advocacy and support matters.
- People working in a safe environment where workers have access to good and affordable health care benefit the society as a whole.
- It's more affordable in the long run to have safer and greener jobs because the cost to people and our environment is high.
- We need to shift now because we are getting sicker.
- There is a sense that small communities are being taken advantage of if they don't have already good paying jobs.

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

- Public perceptions and lack of awareness about the harms.
- Some of the financial issues identified include:
  - See the previous comments about tax policies/incentives primarily benefiting the wealthy
  - The need for green banks to be established and be willing to lend to underserved communities
  - Tribal and rural communities need access to capital.
  - People need to be paid better wages on both the technical end of energy and to work with and co-create solutions with community
  - How we compensate people impacts their self-values/self-worth
- Some of the regulatory issues identified include:
  - The need for rule making that leads to better oversight around health, safety, worker and community health impacts
  - Need for federal policy and intervention. Where are they?
  - How can the ETA be amended?
  - When there are public hearings, a more authentic effort needs to be made to inform the public and act in a way that is responsive to community needs, concerns, and ideas.
  - Meetings should be held in the most impacted communities to reduce barriers to participation.
  - Sound community engagement keeps regulations relevant and useful to the health and well-being of community.
  - Communities also need seats at decision-making tables
- Some of the policy issues identified include:
  - Issues around self-determination and sovereignty need to be respected in the policy making processes.
  - A better analysis of policies that have permitted exploitation, extraction, and harm in the energy industry need to be analyzed and educated about to prevent a repeat of the same injustices.
  - Tax policies reinforce benefits to the wealthy and lack of access to everyone else.
  - The Energy Policy Act of 2013 is a Tribal policy that needs to be brought up to date.



- We need to continue to strengthen the Energy Transition Act and oversee early implementation.
- Support needs to be in place to make change happen at the tribal presidential level.
- Needs more coordination and transparency with the city, county, state and national level.