

Buncombe County and the City of Asheville Renewable Energy Planning

Community Advisory Group Meeting Summary

January 30, 2019, from 2pm – 5pm

Background:

On Wednesday, January 30, 2019, Buncombe County and the City of Asheville hosted two internal workshops as part of its renewable energy transition planning process. The County and City are working with a consulting team, Cadmus, to identify barriers, opportunities, and pathways to achieving its renewable energy goals of achieving utilization of 100% renewable energy in both County and City operations by 2030, and of utilizing 100% renewable energy throughout the City and County by 2042.

The purpose of the Community Advisory Group meeting was to convene members of community organizations at the beginning of the planning process to collect perspectives on potential strategies to meet the community-wide goal. Specific objectives of the meeting included:

- Provide County and City community members with project context, relevant background information, and potential scenarios for reaching the County's community-wide goal to utilize 100% RE by 2042;
- Determine key interests of underlying community perspectives;
- Identify opportunities of interest for reaching the community-wide target, and map out these ideas in terms of type of action, impact potential, challenges and partners; and to
- Build support for the transition work among the community.

The notes below summarize key results and takeaways from the community advisory group meeting.

Attendees:

Four representatives from the County and City were attended the workshop as community advisors, and completed intake interviews with Cadmus staff the phone ahead of the in-person workshop.

- Alesha Reardon, Energy Manager, Buncombe County Schools
- Michelle Myers, Center for Biological Diversity; represents the Western Renewable Coalition – a collection of more than 30 nonprofits in the region
- Pat Deck, Former Educator, Neighborhood Advisory Committee Member
- John Noor, local Environmental Attorney, Sustainability Advisory Committee on Energy and the Environment member

Key takeaways from their intake interviews include the following:

- Renewable energy goals are being pursued because community members are interested in **advancing environmental sustainability and social good**.
- **Education and outreach** need to be conducted throughout the whole community, as well as for municipal operations at both the County and City levels for this initiative.
- The **community needs to buy into this initiative**, needs to understand why it is important, and how it impacts their own lives in a beneficial way.

- The renewable energy plan should account for the County and City’s existing assets and should be **reasonable in terms of cost**.

Part I. Workshop Goals and Current Work

Cadmus staff presented background information on the current energy and policy context of Buncombe County and the City of Asheville and gave an overview of the goals of this work and the planning process. In discussion, the Community Advisory Group expressed what they hoped to learn from the workshop. Questions centered around the following:

- How to achieve the goals in an **equitable** way?
- What is the most **efficient way** to achieve the goal?
 - What is considered **low-hanging fruit**?
- How to bring renewables into the **school system**?
- How to **engage young citizens** in this transition?
- What will the renewable energy plan look like – **what it will and will not include**?
- What will the **process be over the next six months**?

Cadmus then led a discussion of existing renewable energy and energy efficiency efforts that the community members have been involved with or are aware of, as well as current barriers or challenges to renewable energy within the community. During this conversation, the Advisory Group discussed:

- Current efforts to **re-commission school buildings** to improve efficiency
 - Opportunities include reducing recurring maintenance costs, using the capital funding process to pursue the work, and increasing the efficiency.
 - Staff capacity was noted as a challenge.
- Work done by the **Blue Horizons Project** to provide assistance for low-income communities to provide heating retrofits in Buncombe County
 - Opportunities include helping households on home heating assistance programs and using the SE Sustainable Communities Fund.
 - Challenges include limited eligibility, landlord-tenant barriers, trust within low-income and communities of color, displacement risk, and data access
- The **Energy Savers Program**
 - Opportunity to get smart meters in households for demand response. Trust in the utility having more access to household energy use and health concerns with smart meters were noted as concerns.
- Duke’s **proposed solar project at the Mills River site**
 - Challenges include site constraints, cost, and environmental and regulatory challenges,
- Efforts by members of the Western NC Renewables Coalition to conduct **community listening sessions** about sustainability topics, including renewable energy
 - Opportunities within this work have been community outreach, listening sessions, an and an equitable dialogue centering community member who have traditionally had less voice in processes.
- Efforts in a continuous care retirement community to start a **recycling program and an informational campaign around energy efficiency and conservation**.
 - Opportunities from this work included lessons learned around informational campaigns and using a wellness committee structure within the community to organize action



Part II. Priorities for the Renewable Energy Transition

Following a framing presentation that outlined the types of impacts to consider in reaching the County and City’s renewable energy goals, the Community Advisory Group next participated in a brainstorming exercise to better define the types of priorities underlying the renewable energy goal. Priorities were sorted into four categories: 1) renewable generation capacity, 2) environmental, 3) social equity, and 4) financial. This input will help inform the policies and strategies prioritized for further analysis by Cadmus and considered as potential solutions to pursue. The photo below summarizes the criteria raised via discussion.



Themes discussed included:

Overarching priorities:

- There is a healthy **balance** to find across the different priorities expressed.
- Education and outreach to the community are important to develop a **collective voice** around the priorities and structure for meeting the County and City's renewable energy goals.

Generation Capacity:

- An important priority is to **address energy efficiency** to help reduce overall energy needs.
- **Local generation** is important, as well as **visible generation** that people can see.
- Systems should be set-up to make the **transition to renewables easy and seamless**.
- **Projects should be aggregated** wherever possible for greater cost efficiency.

- Working with Duke Energy use **Buncombe County Schools for solar leasing** that features an **education component**, and to define community solar and how to have it benefit low income and communities of color.

Environmental:

- **Environmental preservation** is also a priority to remember in renewable energy development – **don't deforest land** to install solar development or other renewables (e.g. avoid greenfield development) and replant where needed.
- **Meeting carbon reduction goals** is an important priority.

Social Equity:

- Participants also prioritized **equity**, and making sure **programs are inclusive and accessible** to the entire community, and that they improve services provided to low- to moderate-income residents and communities of color.
 - Part of this is also **ensuring that costs are lower for low-income households**, so the transition improves affordability.
- **Education and community buy-in** was also a priority, with discussions on the importance of making the renewable energy transition significant issue that the whole community can support
- The transition should tap opportunities to prepare **young people** for future careers in the renewable energy industry and include a **workforce development and jobs component**. It was also noted that this is hard to do and challenging in NC's policy context.
- **High-energy users should be asked to do more** as part of the transition than low energy users.
- The transition should consider **intersections that increase access to other resources**. For example, how can this work connect to improved transportation access was one question raised.

Financial:

- New resources from the transition should be leveraged for public benefits.
- It is important to **keep costs down, not raise taxes, and use existing resources** to implement the plan.
 - There was some difference of opinion on this point with County and City staff expressing this priority more strongly than the community advisors.
 - One advisor noted that the **plan should also consider options that will cost money and require more resources**.
- Financing programs can be structured to encourage behavior change.
- **Buying renewable energy credits (RECs) is a low priority and a later/last step in the process**
 - The Cadmus team should **explore options that involve selling RECs from local projects** to Duke to support new generation capacity

Additionally, participants were asked several questions during the discussion related to program evaluation and the details of capacity generation. The questions and answers are listed below.

- What is local generation?
 - Electrons that are generated in one location can make it to the buildings they are serving
 - North and South Carolina-based generation
- What is renewable energy?

- Not nuclear power
- Clean power

Several program-based ideas were suggested during the discussion for the project team to consider in their analysis (and/or for other County and City sustainability work):

- NGO-run program to manage voluntary investments citizens want to make in the renewable energy transition
- Menu of options for meeting community goals
- Tree bank – if a tree is cut down as part of a renewable energy project, then it must be replaced (or a fee paid to a Tree Bank that will replace it)
- Carbon tax
- More electric buses

Part III: Renewable Energy Policies and Programs

Cadmus staff next presented on potential strategies for local governments to use to transition their energy supply (primarily electricity) to renewables. Categories of action include: (1) direct action, where county or city resources and powers are used to support local renewable projects; (2) collaborating at the state and utility level to drive market growth; (3) accessing and utilizing renewable energy purchasing options; and (4) gaining direct control over power supply.

Strategy

- Efficiency & renewables
- multisector collaboration
- Duke's EE credits →
- concern w/ selling RECs
- engage entire community
- education
- EE savings ↳ renewables
- RECs @ bottom of list
- reinvestment fund
- additional
- youth
- local apps & maintenance jobs