

Buncombe County and the City of Asheville Renewable Energy Planning

Stakeholder Meeting Summary

January 31, 2019, from 9am – 1pm

Background:

On Thursday, January 31, 2019, Buncombe County and the City of Asheville hosted a stakeholder workshop 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 County by 2042. The purpose of the stakeholder meeting was to convene members of community organizations at the beginning of the planning process to collect perspectives on priorities and potential strategies to meet the community-wide goal. Specific meeting objectives 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 underlying different stakeholder perspectives;
- Identify opportunities of interest for reaching the County and City's municipal targets and the community-wide target, and map out these ideas in terms of type of action, impact potential, challenges, and partners;
- Build support for this transition work from different stakeholders.

The notes below summarize key results and takeaways from the project planning meeting.

Attendees:

- Beth Gentry, A-B Tech
- John Coon, Asheville Airport
- Brad Rouse, Energy Savers Network
- Ron Edgerton, Sierra Club
- Rich Olejniede, Mountain Housing Opportunities
- Paul Reeves, Habitat for Humanity
- Sophie Mullinax, Blue Horizons Project
- Aisha Shepherd, Buncombe County
- Brenda Mills, City of Asheville
- Rasheeda McDaniel, Buncombe County

- Jade Dundas, City of Asheville, Municipal Advisory Group Member
- Dirk Wilmoth, A-B Tech
- Heath Moody, A-B Tech
- Kristy Smith, Buncombe County, Municipal Advisory Group Member
- Chris Dobbins, LOSRC
- Adam Colette, Dogwood Alliance
- Walter Ear, City of Asheville, Municipal Advisory Group Member
- Alesha Reardon, Buncombe County Schools, Community Advisory Group Member
- Jane Hatley, Self-Help Credit Union
- Rebecca Brothers, Buncombe County
- Michelle Myers, Center for Biological Diversity, WNC Renewables Coalition, Community Advisory Group Member
- Bill Ealk, Land of Sky, Clean Vehicles Coalition
- Lucia Daugherty, SPARC Foundation
- Barbara Darby, Mountain Area Workforce, Land of Sky
- Bridget Herring, Energy Program Coordinator City of Asheville
- Amber Weaver, Sustainability Officer, City of Asheville
- Jeremiah LeRoy, Sustainability Officer, Buncombe County¹

Part I. Renewable Energy Policy and Program Pathways

Following stakeholder introductions, Cadmus staff presented an overview of the project, North Carolina's renewable energy policy context, and preliminary policy and program options from Pathways to 100 as a starting point and strategies that could work for the City and County. Throughout the presentation, there was time for Q&A. Key questions are noted below:

- **Goal definition:** Stakeholders asked questions regarding the parameters of the renewable energy goals. Specifically:
 - If the focus is mainly on electricity
 - The sequencing of electricity generation/supply; energy efficiency, building electrification; and transportation actions
 - Clarification on the decision-making process of the renewable energy plan, including how the County and City should prioritize pathways to achieve their goals, such as using virtual power purchase agreements (PPAs) and buying or selling renewable energy credits (RECs)
- **Social Equity:**
 - One attendee noted that there has been success in the past through the Blue Horizons Project in engaging low- to moderate-income and diverse voices in the process

¹ Please note, this attendee list may be incomplete. To be completed with input from City/County staff.

- **Financial:**
 - During the course of discussion, one stakeholder asked if there are budgeting parameters that should be considered to bound the framing of what might be possible in terms of strategies
- **Strategies:**
 - **Renewable Energy Credits and Virtual Power Purchase Agreements.** Stakeholders asked for clarification on the differences between strategies and the impacts of using either RECs or virtual PPAs to achieve the renewable energy goals.
 - **Utility Collaboration.** One attendee noted that Buncombe County and the City of Asheville have a strong track record of utility engagement with Duke Energy through the EITF and Blue Horizons initiative. Another stakeholder asked whether on-bill financing through Duke could be possible.
 - **State/Federal Engagement.** A couple of participants noted that there may be programs at the federal level that may help Buncombe County achieve its goal. Specifically mentioned was the potential of a carbon tax, or resilience requirements.
 - **Homeowner Association Education and Outreach.** One stakeholder noted in response to group purchasing, that some HOAs outright ban renewable energy systems or have restrictive covenants. This was discussed as an opportunity for the County or City to engage with these associations on this topic.
 - **Additional strategies:** One stakeholder noted that the EITF had considered acquiring rights to hydropower wheeled through the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Part II. Collective Visioning

Following the Policy and Programs Pathways presentations, stakeholders participated in a Collective Visioning exercise, in which they wrote a postcard to themselves from the year 2042 – describing what the renewable energy transition looks like. After writing their postcards, Cadmus facilitators read the postcards aloud to the entire workshop group before breaking the stakeholders into smaller working groups.

Key themes from the postcards are organized below:

Expected outcomes:

- The County and City’s renewable energy targets have been successfully met through **partnerships, collaboration, and education**
- Renewable energy is present *within the community*:
 - Community is “**fully solarized**,” specifically there is solar on all public buildings and schools and the majority of buildings within the County
 - There is **renewable energy on the landfill**

- Additional renewable energy opportunities mentioned include **renewable natural gas, geothermal, hydropower, landfill gas reclamation, animal/human waste to energy, and wind** (small and large-scale), indicating a large diversity of power sources
- Coal energy is gone
- Energy efficiency is a key step:
 - Community members will know more about how to manage and their energy use and **consumption is reduced** via efficient technologies and conservation
 - Home technologies in use include **heat pumps and energy efficiency upgrades**
- Transportation is cleaner:
 - Everyone uses **bicycles**
 - Car manufacturers **only make electric vehicles**
 - The city has a robust **EV charging network**
- Equity is a core focus of the programs and initiatives:
 - **Savings are passed through** to residents
 - **Housing is affordable**, and housing is energy efficient
 - Efforts **help families** and those in need
 - Low-income households have **low- or no-cost options to participate** in the transition
 - **Savings are channeled into the community**
 - The transition happens in a way that **breaks down systems of oppression** and injustice
 - Renewable energy is **free or low-cost**
 - The **air is clean**
- State policy changes to allow for more widespread renewable energy adoption:
 - **Power purchase agreements are allowed**
 - Utility market **deregulates**
 - A **millionaire's tax** helps fund the transition/solar on buildings
- Electric utility reacts to a changing market:
 - Duke has a **power plant at Lake Julian**
 - Duke offers **on-bill financing**
 - **3rd-party sales** are allowed
 - Duke become a **cooperative utility**

Means of Success:

- Local Policy and Programs:
 - **Mandates are passed for solar** on new construction
 - **Virtual power purchase agreements** (limited by geographic scope)
 - **Loan guarantee fund for low-income residents** for solar energy or energy efficiency
 - **Taxes can ultimately be lower** as the transition lowers costs and boosts the economy
 - **Smart regulations** help guide the transition
 - **Cost-effective** investments are prioritized

- Buncombe County generates enough **renewable energy for export** or to be sold through virtual means.
- Initiatives:
 - There has been an investment in **both local renewable energy generation, as well as investment in renewable energy credits** (particularly local credits)
 - There are **public private partnerships**
 - The County and City have **invested in energy efficiency**
 - There has been a **strong focus on education and outreach**, that is collaborative and inclusive. Public outreach focused on **identifying benefits of the transition**. Similarly, **education and outreach has been focused on new residents, new businesses, people of color, and young people.**

Other noted changes by 2042:

- Throughout the course of discussion, stakeholders noted a number of **changes that may be brought about by the changing climate**, including a loss of trees, changes to population, and utilities reacting to climate change
- They also reiterated themes of **tackling climate change, building resilience, moving to 0 emissions, and achieving clean energy** as overarching goals

After the reading of all the postcards, **members of the large group expressed initial reactions to the postcards**. Several members expressed that the concept of time stood out in the postcard exercise – that **23 years is both a very long time and a very short time in which to enact significant changes**. Many conditions can change within that time, including the local population size and education about renewable energy, the grid load, and technology. Several members noted that due to these future variables, the plan should be adaptable.

- **Outreach, education and community buy-in.** Stakeholders expressed a strong preference to prioritize outreach, education, and building community buy-in as part of a successful in the RE transition. Specific thoughts or ideas for action include:
 - Opinions expressed at this meeting may not reflect broader community opinions and perspectives, so need more outreach, particularly to vulnerable communities who live day-to-day. Need to show them the benefits of this transition (e.g. improving services, providing alternatives, more affordable housing, etc.).
 - Be inclusive with outreach and invite *everyone* to the table at the beginning of the process, especially people of color and low- and moderate-income communities. Community outreach is extremely important.
 - Messaging must be simple and comprehensive (in plain language), accessible, and motivational. It must make people understand the benefits to all individuals of the renewable energy transition and inspire self-interested people to working in furtherance of the goal is worthwhile.
 - Education on RE and the transition should happen in the schools
 - Internal staff education at the County and City is also needed – should consult with City and County staff before setting goals
 - Benefits to capture from this transition include improved public health, job opportunities, increased community resilience, optimism for youth and faith in the future, and strong County and City reputation, which can connect to tourism and economic development
 - Focus on communication and relationships ahead of technology solutions
 - Understand what language and messaging resonates and clear and simple language that is easy to understand
 - Progress needs to be concrete (see notes about “local generation” below for more)
 - Strategic use of social media for communication

- **Social Equity:** Stakeholders expressed a strong preference for social equity to be a central part of the County and City’s renewable energy transition:
 - Equity and inclusion are necessary for success – without it the entire community won’t be involved, and therefore the community-wide goal won’t be successful
 - From past experiences, know that if social justice is not a component then the issue becomes divisive and does not move forward
 - Part of equity is hearing all voices
 - Should consider how the 100% RE transition impacts our most vulnerable community members
 - Create more tools to add value in an equitable way (i.e. solar for affordable housing)
 - Provide space for people of color and low- and moderate-income communities. Improve community services
 - Improve energy efficiency in affordable housing
 - Build community wealth via the transition

- **Energy Efficiency:** Stakeholders expressed strong interest in including energy efficiency measures as part of the renewable energy transition:
 - Energy efficiency should come first as a way to reduce overall energy demand and the amount of renewable energy that must be produced or purchased.
 - Energy efficiency measures should be used to remove barriers and improve participation in achieving the target for low-income communities and for everyone
 - Create a revolving fund for energy efficiency investments
 - Focus on removing barriers here

- **Local Renewable Energy Generation:** Stakeholders expressed support for prioritizing solutions that are “local,” although definitions of “local” varied among stakeholders:
 - Renewable energy should be produced locally, and local energy production encourages community buy-in and emotional investment in the project
 - Invest in projects with good paybacks
 - Such projects can include highly visible projects like retrofitting schools and government buildings for energy efficiency, or installing solar panels on such buildings
 - The County/City’s image improves more when you can see the renewable energy projects
 - Being a “climate city” attracts other businesses, can improve tourism
 - The County and City should install solar projects on County and City property
 - Capital project and renovations should include energy efficiency and solar by default
 - Commit to this and put funding there
 - Could consider a future bond for city buildings and include renewable energy in it
 - Include AB Tech buildings in this
 - Get real engineering estimates and who what five years can look like and think longer-term with investments about what is best for the community
 - Discussions on the definition of local generation included:
 - Local does not include wind or solar farms from places like Oklahoma but can include projects that contribute to the grid that serves Buncombe County.
 - Renewable energy projects should be located as local to the County and City as possible
 - 100 miles away may still be local
 - Regional may still be local (e.g. adjacent counties)
 - North Carolina
 - General principle could be to start as local as possible

- **Affordable and Realistic Goals:** Stakeholders expressed support for solutions that are affordable and realistic for the County and City to implement, and that are affordable and realistic for citizens.

- Policies must fit within competing priorities of the government and not detract from existing programs.
 - In terms of affordability, the community should consider the micro-level impact to each household (and equitable impacts)
 - In implementing the renewable energy transition, it is important to consult with County and City staff before setting goals to determine realistic budget, funding, and to get real engineering estimates of what will be needed
 - Staff should participate in discussion and educational opportunities about the goals to build buy-in
 - 5-year check-ins to reassess priorities, progress, and budget are important
 - Reality will be completely different in 2042, so need to revisit and revise along the way
 - Some concern was expressed that ideas in the visions were not realistic and incremental steps are important to take; also, a very uncertain timeframe
- **Financial:** In line with issues of affordability, stakeholders also discussed the importance of establishing the right financial programs for the transition:
 - Important to build wealth for the County and City
 - Important to invest in strong capital infrastructure so that all the other pieces fall into place.
 - Possible sources of money for the renewable energy transition could include tourism tax revenues
 - Budget diversification will help with the transition (have a big infrastructure deficit right now too to contend with)
 - Property tax (requires state policy change)
 - Sales tax (must be carefully structured to not be regressive)
 - Tap into tourism tax (requires state policy change) – how to do this at the state level?
 - Community land trusts
 - More dedicated funding to address challenges
 - The County/City could delegate some responsibility to the business community – i.e. “adopt RE”
 - Create competition programs within the community – good press for participants and doesn’t cost the County very much.
 - Can or should the County / City implement a carbon tax?
 - There is potential to receive additional funding from the upcoming hospital acquisition
 - Importance of ROI and accountability from renewable energy projects
 - Concern that policies and investments need to reflect Asheville’s commitment to reaching its goals and achieve targets despite costs. If costs are prohibitive enough to stall action, why did the County and City set targets at all?
 - Goals need to better connect with investment

- State connections:
 - Should connect with the State Housing Finance Agency and tap state financing and credit opportunities
- Learn from what other governments have done that is cost-effective in the short- and long-term
- **Strategies for Direct Action:** Stakeholder expressed a preference to engage in actions at the local level where the County and City would have direct control:
 - Energy Purchasing: Questions were raised about REC and Virtual PPA strategies, and the benefits of either claiming RECs to impact your power mix or selling RECs to improve revenue and ability to fund other renewable energy projects. Discussion on this topic included the following opinions:
 - Want to purchase from a place that would not have created the renewable project “but for” the County and/or City’s purchase. Additionality is important (adding additional generation to the grid based on the County/City’s purchase)
 - Importance of owning versus selling REC:
 - Owning provides the claim to renewable energy generation, but selling would provide financial security and funding for the transition
 - Interest in multiple groups on selling RECs in the short-run for revenue generation (though noting tradeoffs with that option)
 - Reinvest revenues into renewable energy/sustainability programs, such as for schools, gov’t buildings, and better transportation systems
 - Virtual PPA discussion and questions related to the area/region for the purchase, with a preference expressed towards virtual PPAS on the same grid as the County and City. There is also the potential to work with corporations like Apple or Amazon and questions about if this a credible approach.
 - Permitting and zoning strategies: “Solar-ready,” “climate-smart,” “EV-ready”
 - Local generation (see notes in “local” section above)
- **Strategies for Collaboration:** Stakeholders also discussed the importance to collaborate at the state level and with utilities to enact broader policy changes that will impact the County and City.
 - State level actions
 - Local advocacy to change state policies related to renewable energy and energy efficiency is important
 - Partner with statewide advocacy groups
 - Building code
 - Advocate for changes to state law to require new buildings to be solar ready, climate smart, EV ready, LEED standard, etc.
 - Renewable energy

- Solar-ready rehabs
- Reinvestment programs – sell and recycle REC money now

Part IV. Closing

To close the meeting, participants each shared one word about how they felt after workshop discussion. The list of words is included below, with number of times each word was said in parentheses:

- Encouraged (4)
- Hopeful (3)
- Excited (2)
- Grateful (2)
- Invigorated (2)
- Curious
- Engaged
- Inspired
- Optimistic
- Supported