

Transitioning to Renewable Energy: A Community Forum Reflection

On Thursday, October 26th the Sunderland Energy Committee hosted a successful community forum titled “Transitioning to Renewable Energy.” This event had nearly 50 attendees and the discussion was active and wide-ranging and much valuable information was shared. [You can watch the GNAT recording of the event](#), but we also wanted to share how we, as an Energy Committee, created and executed this event in the hopes it can serve as a model for others. Energy Committees are a vital resource to Vermont communities; when we work together, we can be even more powerful.

The Sunderland Town Energy Committee serves the 1000 + people of Sunderland in Bennington County. Our energy committee is always looking for opportunities to educate the community about how we can do more to be a green community and combat the climate crisis.

A few months ago we heard about the opportunity to apply for a \$4000 mini-grant from the Municipal Energy Resilience Program (MERP). The MERP program was passed by the Vermont Legislature in 2022 and is designed to increase energy resilience in municipal buildings and the mini-grant program specifically is to fund municipal efforts for capacity building and active participation in energy resilience initiatives, specific to MERP and beyond. One of the mini-grant uses is for education and outreach regarding Vermont’s climate policies. Our Energy Committee decided that our community and the communities surrounding Sunderland would benefit from a climate change educational and engagement event and began to work out the details needed to apply including working out a tentative budget that included advertising – posters etc; hall rental; speaker lodging (if needed); meals beforehand for speakers and EC members; honorariums (\$100 each); etc. Then we applied for the mini-grant and won the \$4000 funding!

We began planning the nitty gritty aspects of our educational event and decided on a speaker panel and audience participation forum entitled Transitioning to Renewable Energy. We considered when we should host the event by considering existing community events, location, time of year, and time of day to maximize the audience and settled on Thursday, October 26th from 7-9 pm at the nearby Manchester Community Library.

We wanted to ensure we had speakers who would be informative and recognizable to draw community members to the event. We were fortunate to secure a panel that included Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Julie Moore, Representative Laura Sibilila, and Energy Action Network Executive Director Jared Duval. A fourth speaker, Neale Lunderville, President & CEO of Vermont Gas was set to be on the panel but, due to illness, had to cancel the day before the event.

We were fortunate to have an experienced media person on our Energy Committee, Andrew McKeever, to moderate the panel. We also knew we wanted to ensure that audience members had plenty of time to ask questions and created an agenda that reflected that.

We made sure we had an extensive marketing plan that included contacting all the area’s Energy Committees, environmental/climate groups; schools; newspapers, and the local community TV station. We also promoted the event on Front Porch Forum (two postings), the local regional planning commission, on our Energy Committee Facebook page, and on the Town of Sunderland’s web page. Posters were placed in public buildings throughout the area. We also reached out to statewide climate groups and asked that they share with their memberships as well.

All this planning, marketing, and organizing work ensured that we would be proud of the event that was produced no matter the audience and fortunately, we had nearly 50 attendees on an unseasonably warm evening. Throughout the event, differing viewpoints were not only tolerated but encouraged. The back and forth between panelists and the great questions from the audience made

all the work worthwhile and the event was a great success! [Once again you can watch the video for the Transitioning to Renewable Energy event here.](#)

*Written by Jeff Dexter, on behalf of the Sunderland Energy Committee. If you have questions or would like more context, reach Jeff at **jets1627@gmail.com***