The Power of Engagement: Building Trust and Support for Clean Energy Projects

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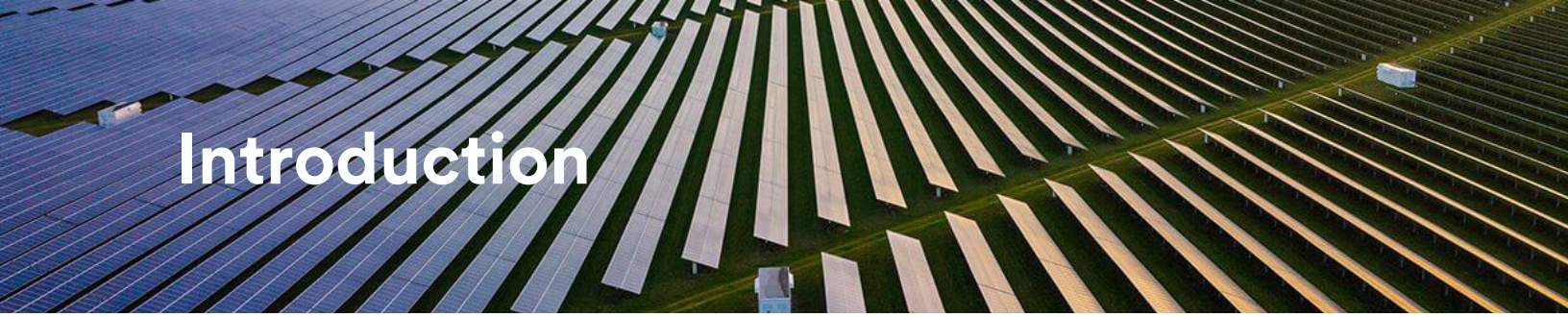
Author: Natalie Manitius
Contributors: Annika Harrington, Asa Ackerly

CLEAN AIR TASK FORCE



Introduction

Meeting the United States' energy needs will require building new infrastructure at an unprecedented pace and scale. Yet, across the country, projects are encountering growing resistance at the local level that threatens to slow progress toward a clean energy future. In many cases, opposition is not about clean energy itself, but rather stems from concerns about land use, environmental impacts, past experiences with infrastructure development, transparency, and trust.

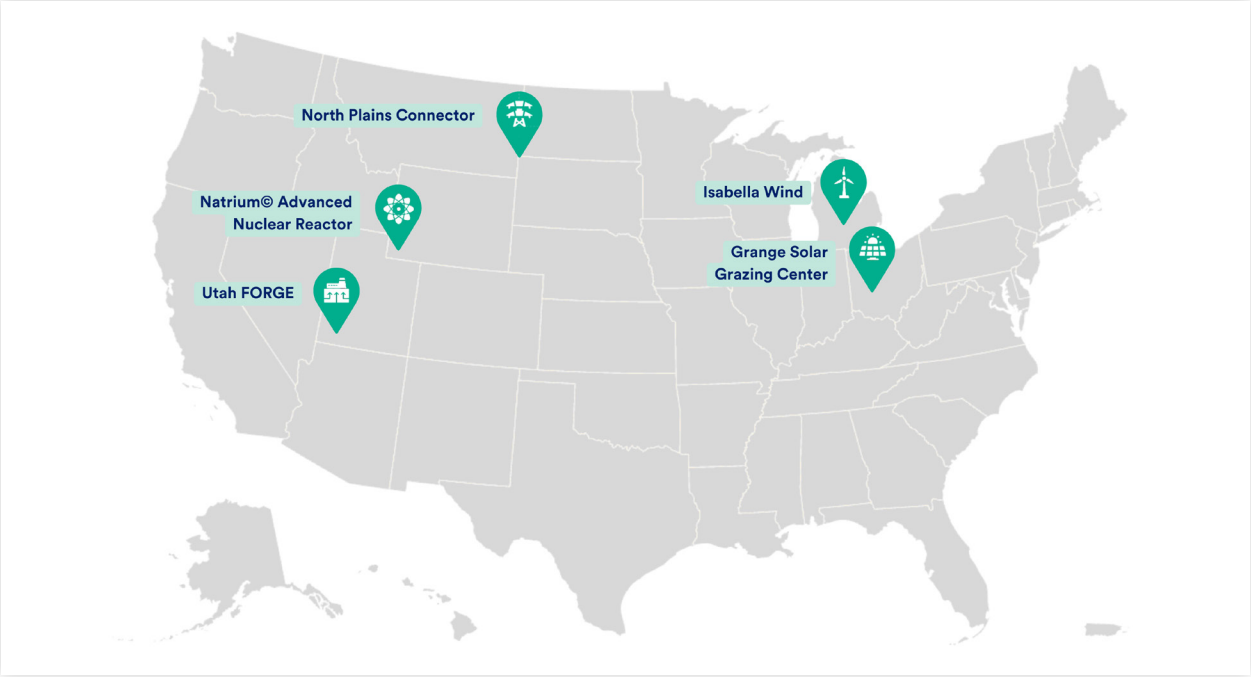
Communities are being asked to host unfamiliar and often complex infrastructure, whether it's an upgrade to an existing transmission line, a commercial-scale solar project, or a first-of-its-kind advanced nuclear reactor. When meaningful engagement is lacking or misaligned with local expectations, support for even the most carefully planned projects can fall apart.

Community engagement has therefore become a cornerstone element of clean energy deployment. Done well, it can build lasting relationships, reduce permitting timelines and litigation risk, and ensure that projects deliver real benefits to the people most affected by them.

Clean Air Task Force (CATF) developed a series of case studies exploring real-world community engagement efforts across a range of technologies, geographies, and communities. These case studies are based on interviews with project developers, local leaders, and community organizations. The goal of these learnings is to equip developers and governments with practical guidance for building trust and local support, and to empower communities with tools to advocate for meaningful engagement and benefits. Together, these insights informed a set of best practices for community engagement.

Case Study Overview

These five case studies present real-world examples of community engagement best practices for clean energy projects and critical electric transmission infrastructure. Each is written as a separate fact sheet.



Project Name	About the Project	Location	Engagement Tactics
Isabella Wind	A 383 MW wind project, spanning 56,000 acres with 136 turbines, developed by Apex Clean Energy.	Isabella County, Michigan	Engagement for this project focused on relationship building, open dialogue, engaging trusted actors, and a unique compensation structure.
Utah FORGE	A cutting-edge next-generation geothermal research facility spanning five square miles, built in partnership between the University of Utah and the U.S. Department of Energy.	Beaver County, Utah	The engagement team for this project leveraged the University's role as a trusted local actor in the community, creating engaging educational opportunities and ensuring transparency.
Natrium® Advanced Nuclear Reactor	A first-of-its-kind 345 MWe sodium fast reactor with capacity up to 845 MWe with a storage system, developed by TerraPower and currently under construction.	Kemmerer, Wyoming	The siting process was unique as the utility and developer engaged various local, state, and federal actors and ensured the project was in line with the community's long-term goals.
North Plains Connector	A proposed 420-mile-long, 525 kV transmission line that will connect the Eastern and Western Interconnections, creating approximately 3,000 MW of new capacity; developed by Grid United.	Montana and North Dakota	The developer has taken a unique, landowner-first approach to siting and routing, and is partnering with community foundations to develop a robust community investment program.
Grange Solar Grazing Center	A 500 MW, 2,570-acre solar grazing facility, proposed by Open Road Renewables but ultimately canceled.	Logan County, Ohio	Although the project was canceled after it was recommended for denial by the state siting board, the developer's engagement approach exemplified many best practices around broad public outreach, establishing a local presence, and developing a community benefits program.

Community Engagement Best Practices for Developers

These case studies illustrate a number of lessons learned and best practices that developers should integrate into their approach to community engagement.

Initial Outreach

Learning from the past: No community is a blank slate. Some communities have past experiences with infrastructure projects or promises never delivered. All communities have unique local contexts, ways of life, and visions for their community. Research on community context should shape any approach to community engagement and equip a developer to better discuss local impacts.

Early outreach: Once the first community member is approached, it is safe to assume everyone has heard about the project. Word spreads quickly. For projects sited on private land, landowners should be approached first, then community leaders should be engaged, and then the developer should conduct broader outreach with all community members. Initial outreach to landowners and community leaders should focus first on building rapport through casual conversations.

But what is considered early? Early means before the final plans are drawn up and submitted for a permit, with enough time to adjust the project site or design based on community feedback. It is possible that there is such a thing as too early. In the case of the Grange Solar Grazing Center, engagement for the project went on for nearly five years before applying for a permit from the state. Over time, opposition to the project grew and became more organized.

Widespread engagement: Reaching out to everyone means reaching out to everyone who may be interested or affected by the project. Developers should use a diverse array of outreach tactics to meet a broad audience. These can include mailing flyers to landowners and neighbors, hosting open houses at the local restaurant, setting up an office in town, offering to present to various community organizations, hosting virtual meetings, establishing a meeting cadence with local officials, and putting up a booth at local events and fairs. Meetings should be held in languages and at times of day that are accessible for those in the community. Outreach also includes proactively engaging with local emergency service providers, especially for projects with potential fire risk.

In Action: Widespread Outreach

Apex Clean Energy, the developer of the 383 MW Isabella Wind project in Michigan, first approached potential landowners in conversation, then mailed informational postcards to all landowners with 40 or more acres before engaging the broader community. Once they knew they had a potentially viable project, Apex made sure to have an active presence in the community and be accessible to everyone through weekly open houses at restaurants, presentations to residents, and meetings with local officials and other stakeholders.

Tribal engagement: Consultations with Tribes should begin early, regardless of when or if they are formally required in regulatory processes. Tribes should be consulted individually and separately from other Tribes or governing entities. Particularly during the siting phase, developers should consult with Tribal cultural specialists and Tribal historic preservation offices. Impacted Tribes should be engaged regardless of a regulatory requirement for formal Tribal consultation. And even if a project is not sited on Tribally owned land, it may still be sited on ancestral lands and impact cultural resources important to Tribes.

In Action: Tribal Engagement

For the proposed North Plains Connector transmission line, developer Grid United has proactively engaged 21 Tribes across the region, despite the line not directly passing through any Tribal land.

Shaping the Project

Flexible siting: Where possible, developers should allow for flexibility in project location early in the siting phase. Initial conversations with landowners should help inform the final shape of the project. Consulting with local stakeholders early can also mitigate potential conflict down the road, and local knowledge of existing site conditions can help avoid complications during construction.

In Action: Flexible Siting

Grid United has worked closely with landowners on routing preferences while also considering environmental or engineering constraints on the proposed 420 mile North Plains Connector transmission line. This approach has successfully resulted in voluntary lease negotiations with private landowners.

Aligning with the community: Aligning a project with the long-term goals of a community can both build broad support and ensure that meaningful benefits accrue to a community. Clean energy projects may often overlap with community priorities like economic development, job creation, environmental stewardship, or energy resilience. Developers should identify areas where a project could contribute to a community's priorities and find ways to enhance these aspects of a project.

In Action: Aligning with the Community

From the start, the siting process for TerraPower's advanced nuclear reactor prioritized finding a host community with a soon-to-be retiring coal plant. For the City of Kemmerer, the economic development opportunities of the proposed plant directly aligned with their vision of economic diversification and catalyzing comnunity support.

Community Benefits

Community benefits: Well-designed community benefits can demonstrate a long-term commitment to a community and build support for a project. Community benefits can take many forms, from negotiated agreements to ad hoc financial contributions, upgrades to existing infrastructure, or commitments to hiring the local workforce. Regardless of their structure, community benefits programs should be developed in consultation with impacted communities, implemented early in project development processes, and distributed equitably.[1]

Good neighbor agreement: Participating landowners usually receive financial compensation for hosting a project; however, neighboring landowners may also be impacted by the project without receiving any compensation. Sometimes, this can lead to perceptions of unfairness, especially for technologies like wind, where turbines may be visible and dispersed across an entire community. Good neighbor agreements, typically a signed agreement with nearby businesses or residents, can address impacts to nearby properties and ensure benefits are equitably felt.

In Action: Good Neighbor Agreements

Apex Clean Energy, the developer of the 383 MW Isabella Wind project in Michigan, negotiated lease agreements with adjacent property owners to ensure financial compensation even if those owners are not hosting turbines on their property.

Workforce opportunities: Workforce needs for clean energy projects may vary widely. Within the immediate need of the project, local hiring commitments and project labor agreements (signed commitments with labor unions) can go a long way in building support for a project. Developers can also partner with local workforce boards, community colleges, unions, or high schools to create training programs that prepare residents for future workforce roles.

Staying Present

Local presence: Staying present and visible to a community throughout the lifespan of a project is crucial to building a longstanding relationship and fostering trust. Engagement should not stop once the final plans are drawn or a permit is approved. Developers should provide regular updates on project development and construction at public meetings and online.

Transparency: Honest and transparent communication goes very far in building trust. When communities feel they are being left in the dark or are not getting the full picture, skepticism and distrust can arise. Open information on project timelines, safety measures, and expected impacts — both positive and negative — can help address misinformation and create constructive conversations around community concerns. Transparency can take many forms, including hosting open houses, publishing project updates to a website, providing data and monitoring environmental impacts, and providing factsheets.

1 Learn more here: Community Benefits Programs & Clean Energy

In Action: Transparency

Utah FORGE is a cutting-edge geothermal research facility in Beaver County, Utah. The project team installed computers in all three of the county's libraries that display seismic monitoring of

Educational opportunities: Education-focused initiatives can help demystify an energy technology not familiar to a community. Developers can partner with local universities, schools, libraries, and community organizations to create programs. These can include hosting site visits, hosting presentations from third-party experts, visiting local schools, and developing informational materials.

Youth engagement: Involving youth in developing an energy project — through school programs, creative contests, or internships — not only introduces a new generation to clean energy, but it also engages a new voice from the community.

In Action: Youth Engagement

Utah FORGE runs a county-wide poster contest for elementary students and hosts a statewide song parody contest for high school students.

Trusted actors: Like partnering with local organizations, support from trusted community voices and respected external individuals can be very impactful. For example, inviting a leader from another community to speak about their experience with a previously developed project can provide valuable and relatable insights. Other opportunities include inviting presentations from technical experts and elevating the voices of supportive community leaders. Developers can also leverage local expertise by hiring engagement specialists from the area with a deep understanding of the community.

Lessons Learned: Raquette Lake Battery Storage

In 2023, a 2.4-acre, 20 MW battery storage project was proposed to be built in Raquette Lake, a hamlet in New York's Adirondack Park. Word of the project spread after the developer approached the local fire chief about a fire plan, and by that time the developer had already purchased land for the project. Although the battery storage project would help alleviate frequent power outages for the remote area, local opposition grew quickly. Community concerns centered around safety, noise, and light pollution, environmental impact, and property values. The project was ultimately withdrawn.

- Word of the project spread before formal public notice. Lack of transparency and early engagement created an aura of secrecy, sparked concerns of corruption, and fomented a lack of trust.
- Locals indicated they would have been more willing to help developers find a better site elsewhere in the region had the developers reached out for community input earlier on.
- Most opponents did not inherently oppose battery storage projects, just the location and process. Good siting with local input and minimal environmental impact could have reduced opposition.

Community Engagement Best Practices for All Stakeholders

The case studies demonstrated that all stakeholders — developers, governments, academics, and advocacy and community organizations — have a role to play in supporting meaningful community engagement.

Soliciting input: In addition to developers, local governments or other stakeholders can play an important role in soliciting input from the community and can be trusted intermediaries who ensure that engagement is comprehensive and inclusive. Municipal leaders can host town halls or listening sessions early in the planning process to collect community feedback. Creative solutions can also ensure more voices are heard, instead of relying only on formal comment periods.

In Action: Soliciting Input

To gauge community sentiments on TerraPower's proposed 345-MW advanced nuclear reactor, the City of Kemmerer, WY included a survey in residents' water bills.

Partnership with local organizations: Community-based organizations and local universities are often trusted actors in a community and can leverage their network to support effective engagement. Nonprofits may help facilitate dialogue on specific topic areas and with underrepresented groups. Universities can support educational initiatives and provide technical assistance to local governments. In rural areas, agricultural extension offices in particular can offer expertise on land use, water, and farming impacts to help bridge the gap between the technical details of a project and broader public understanding.

Transparent processes: Behind many clean energy projects is a mountain of paperwork, ranging from environmental reviews to local, state, and federal permit applications. These regulatory processes can often be complex to navigate and may not feel accessible to the public. Government agencies at all levels can help facilitate public participation by hosting public information sessions that explain permitting timelines and requirements, providing multilingual materials, and offering tools for submitting comments both in person and online. Public-facing dashboards can also help community members track the status of applications, upcoming hearings, and agency decisions in real time.

Coordinating efforts: No one entity is solely responsible for community outreach and engagement. Developers, local leaders, state agencies, and advocates all play a role in helping community members navigate siting, local approval, state permitting and review, monitoring, and compliance processes. Open dialogue, joint meetings, and coordination across agencies and institutions can simplify and streamline project development.

Policy Takeaways

While community engagement is a crucial element in project success, it is not conducted in a bubble. Policies at the federal, state, and local levels can enable or hinder community engagement.

Improve state siting and permitting policies

State siting policies determine if, where, and how clean energy projects are developed, and which level of government can approve projects. State siting policies vary widely across the U.S.[2] In some states, decision-making authority is left entirely up to local governments; in others, a state entity makes the decision; and in many states, a hybrid approach is employed where jurisdiction depends on project size.

Under policies where the state has some or all authority, there are varying approaches to how local communities are consulted and to what degree local preferences influence a decision. In these states, policies can improve community engagement processes and outcomes by requiring engagement plans as part of the application process, mandating community consultations, providing intervenor funding, and requiring community benefit programs.

For example, in New York, the Office of Renewable Energy Siting (ORES) has exclusive siting authority for major wind and solar projects. For projects under ORES review, the law requires developers to hold pre-application meetings with local governments, allocates intervenor funding for local governments and community groups, and institutes a hearing process for substantive community concerns.

While policies should support engagement with local communities and consider local contexts, policymakers should be careful not to let political preferences or small groups of highly vocal opposition have an outsized influence over project decisions. When this happens, projects that otherwise meet all technical and environmental standards can be halted, creating an uncertain development environment. Such a scenario is exemplified by the Grange Solar Grazing Center, where, under Ohio's state siting policy that gives local government representatives extraordinary say in project decisions, the project was denied.

Policymakers can also reform state siting and permitting processes to reduce complexity, streamline decision-making, and create clear avenues for public engagement. This can include setting timelines for permitting decisions, setting requirements for early and meaningful community engagement, increasing coordination across state agencies, adequately funding state permitting offices, and creating a centralized dashboard for public information on progress.

Good state siting policies can mitigate the need for a heightened deference to local concerns. State siting policies should have technical, environmental, and social standards in place, with clear expectations and measurable requirements.

Funding for technical assistance and capacity-building programs

Technical assistance programs can provide local governments and community organizations valuable support in developing local policies impacting project siting and approvals and navigating decisions around proposed projects. State funding can be directed toward state agencies to host in-person workshops with residents and local leaders, toward universities to develop technical assistance programs, toward state agencies or external organizations to develop clean energy training programs to build the capacity of municipal- or county-level government staff, or as grants toward planning bodies to support proactive visioning for clean energy in local and regional planning processes.

2 Learn more here: https://www.catf.us/resource/laws-in-order/

Integrate clean energy into land use planning

State governments should support integrated land use and clean energy processes that bring together local governments, residents, advocacy organizations, industry, and other stakeholders such as agriculture and conservation groups. These efforts can help communities define where and how clean energy fits into their long-term vision and how it can align with community goals like economic development or land stewardship. Integrated planning processes can also help reduce conflicts with stakeholders of competing land use interests and foment mutually developed solutions to reduce and mitigate impacts. Facilitating early, inclusive planning before a specific project is proposed can reduce conflict, support community development, and optimize siting outcomes for clean energy.

Energizing Action

Good community engagement is not just about checking a box or saying all the right things, but rather about building lasting, trusted relationships with the communities hosting the energy infrastructure of tomorrow. While project developers have the most significant roles to play in community outreach, local leaders, state agencies, community organizations, and other stakeholders are all critical in ensuring community voices are heard.

At the same time, policy frameworks can be designed and implemented to enable meaningful community engagement, provide more certainty to developers, and ensure effective siting and permitting processes.