

rural new york minute

ISSUE NUMBER 9/SEPTEMBER 2007

Home Grown Power: Community Energy Initiatives in Upstate NY

By Shawn Lindabury, Todd M. Schmit, Tania Schusler, and Rod Howe, Cornell University

Energy use, production, and the need to develop renewable energy sources are becoming prominent issues at the federal, state, and local levels. Several municipalities in upstate New York are addressing energy issues at the community level by pursuing initiatives to implement community energy plans, develop local renewable sources of energy, and encourage energy conservation and increased efficiency among residents, businesses, and municipal governments. Here, we highlight the considerations and challenges faced by several rural New York communities that are currently working on renewable energy and energy conservation initiatives. This information may serve as a useful guide for other communities to follow in developing their own energy initiatives.



Energy initiatives → Economic development opportunities

Local production keeps energy money inside the community rather than exporting it to outside entities. This money can create new business opportunities that can lead to lower taxes and increased jobs. Farmers and other landowners can benefit from revenue generated from renewable energy production on their land. Local energy production can provide a source of low cost energy with stable long-term prices that decrease costs for businesses, residents, and government. Energy conservation and increased energy efficiency throughout the community are also important tools for decreasing energy costs.

Renewable energy use and energy conservation have environmental benefits

The burning of fossil fuels emits large amounts of greenhouse gases and other air pollutants. As the issue of global climate change becomes more prominent, citizens are demanding action from their local governments. Because local governments interact directly with community members, they can be influential in changing energy usage patterns and encouraging local energy development.

What should communities consider when pursuing energy initiatives of their own?

- *Broad-based community involvement is essential to the success of any renewable energy project.*
- *Energy committees that establish good working relationships with local municipal government are more effective.*
- *Taking advantage of local resources contributes to successful project implementation.* Communities have partnered with their local Cooperative Extension offices and planning departments and benefited from student involvement through educational institutions.
- *Other communities can provide models, but every community is different. The process that worked for one community may not work for another.*
- *Group dynamics are very important in community energy planning and development.*
- *Renewable energy, energy conservation, and increased energy efficiency are closely linked.*

What are some of the challenges communities face?

- *Technical feasibility studies and energy conservation efforts require time and money.*
- *Getting diverse representation from all segments of the community is difficult because of the time commitment to participate in meetings and other activities*
- *Progress can be slow because energy committees are commonly made up entirely of volunteers.*
- *Facilitating clear communication among participants is an ongoing challenge.*
- *Renewable energy and energy conservation is a new concept for many people so public education is important.*

Please visit our website for an upcoming *CaRDI Report* on Community Energy Initiatives in NYS that includes detailed information and evaluations of three New York communities who have undertaken their own local energy initiatives. The experiences in these communities can serve as a resource to communities who are considering pursuing energy initiatives of their own. Understanding the commitments needed up front and the potential pitfalls to avoid will improve the efficiency of municipal planning efforts in addressing energy initiatives. With the proper preparation and commitment, communities can successfully address many energy issues locally. ♦