



EXTENSION & RENEWABLES CONVENING

In October 2022, the Graham Sustainability Institute, with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation, convened a small gathering of land grant university Extension professionals in the Midwest to discuss the role that Extension currently plays in facilitating conversations about renewable energy and whether/how they might be interested in expanding that role in the future. The convening included Extension professionals and staff who work on energy and/or community development, along with staff from DOE and USDA, renewable energy developers, social science researchers, and professionals with land use planning expertise.

In a process designed and facilitated by the Center for Socially Engaged Design, the convening included a stage-setting dinner followed by a day-long workshop where participants individually, within specific stakeholder groups, and collectively:

1. Brainstormed the next iteration of a shared vision for the future;
2. Identified existing assets supporting this vision;
3. Recognized challenges to achieving it; and
4. Built opportunities to work together across various areas of expertise.

From this process, participants generated a shared vision about how Extension might help facilitate further conversations, highlighting several key goals for any future work, including:

1. Centering communities' voices and desires in every conversation;
2. Coaching the conversation in rural prosperity, with renewable energy development acting as a potential tool for communities to thrive, rather than a requirement or end goal;
3. Increasing trust and transparency in the renewable energy siting process, while also maintaining the existing trust that Extension has built with communities;
4. Grounding discussions in facts and established research;
5. Uplifting and including overlooked stakeholders and trusted community organizations .

Assets, Challenges, and Opportunities to Make the Vision a Reality

After the visioning exercise, the facilitators asked participants to identify assets they could bring to support the newly edited vision, acknowledge the challenges and gaps that exist within their sphere that could present a barrier to participating, and the opportunities they saw for building on assets or overcoming challenges in bringing the vision to reality. For this exercise, participants were grouped into five stakeholder groups: Community Development Specialists, Planning/Zoning Professionals, Natural Resources/Ag Specialists, Renewable Energy Industry, and State / Federal Government.

Within these stakeholder groups, each participant individually identified assets and challenges and pooled them within their stakeholder group. Then, each stakeholder group collectively shared their top three assets and challenges with the entire convening. These identified assets and challenges were then linked to the evolving vision by connecting the sticky notes (with yarn) to the ideas, fears/hesitancies, questions, and excitements identified in the visioning exercise.



POOLING OUR ASSETS

Participants were prompted to think of assets as a broad range of capacities, including knowledge, experiences, materials, and funding. These could be individual, organizational, or institutional assets and could span the seven different forms of community capital: natural, human (health & wellness, educational), cultural, social, political, financial, and built. **Assets were added as Pink notes** under each stakeholder group on the board.

RECOGNIZING CHALLENGES AND GAPS

Next, participants were prompted to think about challenges the vision would present or areas of the vision that would be more challenging than others from their stakeholder perspective or due to gap in capacity. Challenges were added as **Orange notes** under each stakeholder group on the board.

BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FORWARD ACTION

Following the sharing of assets and challenges, each participant pitched one or two opportunities that they thought the broader group might pursue. These could build off an asset, prompt collaboration, and/or tackle a challenge. They were added to the vision, and the broader group voted on which of these opportunities the group should pursue collectively for the most impact. Opportunities were added as **Purple notes** on the wall, and they were placed by participants where they best aligned with the vision. Participants then used stickers to “vote” for their favorite opportunities (defined variously as most important; most urgent; most innovative).

NEXT STEPS

To summarize the day and leave with concrete action items, the facilitators reflected on the categories of action they saw emerge:

- **Knowledge sharing** (i.e., collating and curating existing relevant “tools” currently being used by Extension and others in planning processes; creating opportunities to continuously share);
- **Building the toolkit** (i.e., creating planning templates and information about renewables and their local impacts on rural prosperity that facilitators can draw upon);
- **Piloting a process** (i.e., attempting to bring to fruition the edited “vision” of facilitated conversations about renewable energy within the context of rural prosperity);
- **Developing training** (i.e., for training Extension educators and private sector planners on the facilitation process and the renewables/rural prosperity intersection more generally); and
- **Funding** (i.e., identifying funding to make all of the above possible).



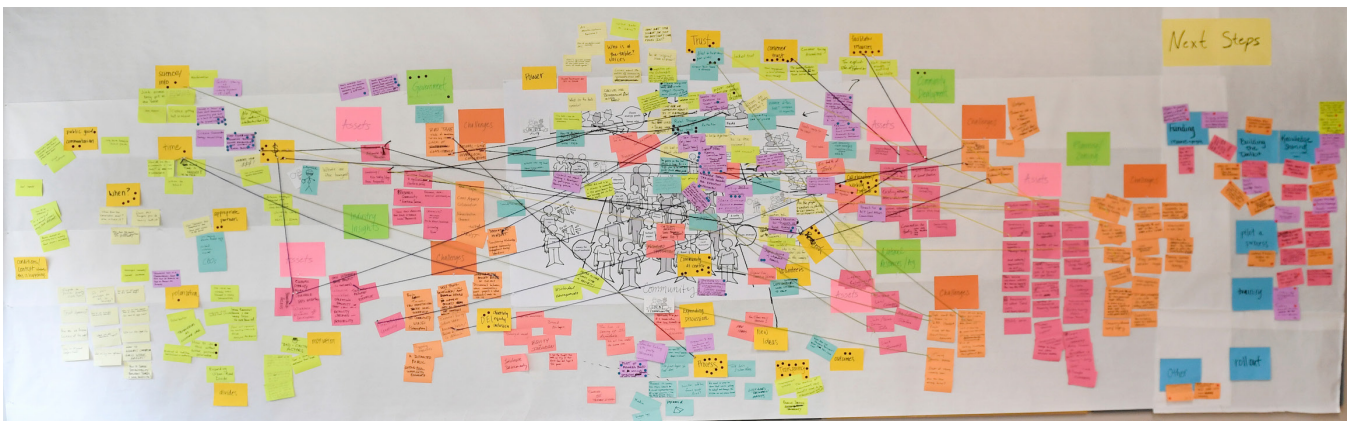


Participants were invited to reflect on what personal next steps they would like to take to advance these opportunities. [Read the next steps identified by each participant.](#)

Key Themes from the Workshop

The convening generated a large number of ideas and reactions, which added significant nuance to the original vision and began to build a basis for understanding the assets and challenges faced by a number of the stakeholders key to enacting this vision. [These ideas—315 sticky notes, by our count— are available in this document.](#)

Instead of reporting on them all, in the following pages we highlight some of the areas where there was either lots of energy in the room (measured by voting “dots” used by participants at various points throughout the session) or where there were many connections between the various parts of the convening.



[» Click for larger image](#)



RURAL PROSPERITY AT THE END OF THE ROAD/ COMMUNITY AT THE CENTER

The vision started without a clear “end of the road” goal for where the facilitation process would lead. Did it include both wind and solar? Did it have to include utility-scale renewable energy? In the end, it was clear that the group was much more comfortable with a vision of community conversations to advance the goal of “rural prosperity,” a challenge for which renewable energy might be, but would not necessarily be, an appropriate solution. This would give communities the chance to consider energy infrastructure not as the problem, but as a potential tool for rural prosperity. Further, there was great positive energy around the centrality of the community in the vision.

| Opportunities | Additional Ideas | Corresponding Asset/ Challenge |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find funding to facilitate conversations/listening sessions in rural areas. Seek first to understand, share findings, develop resources. Grants for Extension to “coach” on rural prosperity (with energy as potential solution, not problem). Fund *pilot* long-term planning processes around renewables in the context of rural prosperity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up a collaborative siting ecosystem in *every state* with technical assistance, multiple partners, funding, etc., to address local needs to promote rural prosperity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Industry asset: workforce and economic development (jobs); Industry challenge: “Operation Mindset”—transitioning relationships, ongoing community engagement during operations; breaking habits/ business as usual is difficult. |

PROCESS/TRANSPARENCY/TRUST

Trust and transparency came up frequently in the course of the convening—that it was a quality currently lacking in many renewables planning discussions and that it would be essential for facilitators. That Extension often has trust among rural stakeholders was an asset discussed in many groups, but how to maintain trust or the fear of losing trust was noted as a challenge.

| Opportunities | Concerns, Hesitancies | Corresponding Asset/Challenge |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot of planning process with willing extension partner. • Consider funding third party advocates; begin with local trusted entities and equip them to lead; think about who is not in the room in all parts of the process. • Need to build trust from within. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metrics of measurement—cost, benefit, revenue-share need to be transparent. • The pressure on local officials is huge. This is a tough place to be and the process should provide relief. • Convener trust: The convener/facilitator must be trusted. Will the trust survive the process? • Facilitator resources: The explicit role of extension. Not having enough qualified facilitators. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community development asset: Local unbiased convener, trained facilitators. • Community development challenge: Not dedicated staff (in their plan of work). • Natural resources/ag asset: legacy relationships—trust, faith. • Planning and zoning challenge: Conflict avoidance; fear of losing trust in addressing high conflict. |

WHAT INFO/SCIENCE INFO/ROLE OF RESEARCH

Participants underscored the need for community conversations to be grounded in facts, and a current concern is that misinformation is part of too many planning processes. They noted that, as an entity with one foot in the academy and another in communities, Extension can bring research to the process, but that facilitators/planners themselves may need training on energy and its community-level impacts.

| Opportunities | Concerns, Hesitancies | Corresponding Asset/Challenge |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a 'menu' of facts about renewables. Communities pick facts as a basis for understanding *Like Ground Rules*. • Training/education for planners (and planning students) on renewable energy. • Support tests with independent research. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Junk science being put on the table, allowing outside advocates on both sides to dominate message, process and decision. • No place for cultural and intellectual humility. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural resources/ag challenge: People want their science in 280 characters. • Community development asset: Tapping into research, doing research, bring it back to the community. |

DEI/WHO IS AT THE TABLE/POWER

Participants noted the importance of inclusivity in the community discussion, that Extension is not the only actor facilitating conversations, and that Extension may be perceived differently in different communities and from state to state. There was also discussion about the diversity of voices in a community and the need to especially recognize the most vulnerable voices in the community conversation.

| Opportunities | Questions | Concerns, Hesitancies |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Let's enroll local citizens to help. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curious about the notion of community representatives. Who?—absentee landowners, "unofficial leaders", "silent majority". Can we use referendum vs. siting board? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the vulnerable: who is recognizing who is most at risk of being made more vulnerable AND ensuring their voice is heard. The hats—how do people view community members? |

WHEN?

There were a number of questions—but not many answers—about the optimal timing of engagement, how to initiate it, and who should initiate it.

| Opportunities | Questions | Corresponding Asset/Challenge |
|---------------|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When does this conversation occur? How do we know a community is *ripe*/ready to have this conversation? Who initiates it? Does this happen prior to leasing contracts? What locations are prioritized? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natural resources/ag challenge: Timing—reactive vs. proactive, sense of urgency with current projects |



APPENDICES

Appendix I : Top Assets and Challenges Brought by Different Sets of Actors

PLANNING AND ZONING PROFESSIONALS

| Assets | Challenges |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical Resources, Local and Extension & Beyond. • Connections and Collaboration. • Facilitative resources (extension)—training, some other capacity depending on state. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban bias in planning & zoning, most planning schools not coaching rural planning, lack of certified planners in rural areas. • Conflict avoidance: Fear of losing trust in addressing high conflict; if the consensus of the local decision making is “No,” does it affect the extension brand going forward; how to call out misinformation w/o being seen as an advocate. • State and federal parameters, resources, incentives to support local planning and extension. |

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SPECIALISTS

| Assets | Challenges |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locally-based unbiased convener. • Trained facilitators. • Tapping into research, doing research, bring it back to the community. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political pressure, competing interests—state leaders, local, extension administrators. • Not dedicated staff (in their plan of work). • Connection between extension and research. |

NATURAL RESOURCE/AG SPECIALISTS

| Assets | Challenges |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legacy relationships—trust, faith. • Uniqueness of local extension staff. • Data/science-driven info. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People want their science in 280 characters. • How do we bring other extension staff to the table? Who does it? • Timing: reactive/proactive. |

GOVERNMENT (AT ALL LEVELS)

| Assets | Challenges |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources—financial & technical. • Leadership/risk-taking/long-term perspective. • Providing incentives & regulating—carrots and sticks. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National-scale institutions—hyperlocal challenges. • Lack of consistency. • Red tape and lack of nimbleness, not easy to be nimble. |

RENEWABLE ENERGY INDUSTRY

| Assets | Challenges |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic stability micro/macro. • Workforce and economic development (jobs). • Technical resources and expertise. • Operating projects that can help inform reality—checking feasibility. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Operation Mindset”—transitioning relationships, ongoing community engagement during operations. • Breaking habits/business as usual is difficult. • Interconnection process builds in delays. |

Appendix II : Schedule

DINNER

Thursday October 6 (evening)

Get to know each other and why the issue of renewables in rural communities is important to all participants as individuals. This conversation will set the stage for building toward opportunities to work together across various areas of expertise and work titles/organizations.

WORKSHOP

8:30 am

Breakfast | Develop a set of Community Agreements to guide the day.

8:40 am - 10:20 am

How did we get here, where can we go together | Organizers share the story of what brought them together, reveal a prototype of a future vision, gather feedback and develop ideas toward a more collective/co-built vision with the convened group.

10:20 am - 10:30 am

Short break

10:30 am - 10:50 pm

Co-building the next iteration of a vision

10:30 am - 11:15 am

Pooling our assets | Groups brainstorm what assets (knowledge, experience, materials, funding, etc.) contribute to the vision.

11:15 am - 12:05 pm

Lunch

12:05 pm - 12:50 pm

Recognizing gaps and challenges | Groups discuss the challenges or gaps that they see with the initial sketched vision. Each group identifies the highest priority challenges from their perspective.

12:50 pm - 1:00 pm

Short break

1:00 pm - 2:30 pm

Where do we go from here? | Dedicated time to think about 1-2 opportunities that each participant pitches to the group for moving the new co-designed vision forward. End by converging on the next steps the group wants to work on together.



Appendix III : List of Participants

| Name | Organization |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Augustine, Bevan | RWE Renewables Americas |
| Botero, Juan | Department of Energy SETO |
| Bruns, Jodi | North Dakota State University |
| Doering, Otto | Purdue University |
| Gilman, Patrick | Department of Energy WETO |
| Gruder, Sherrie | University of Wisconsin |
| Hoen, Ben | Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory |
| Hoesch, Karl | University of Michigan |
| Kostek, Kendra | Department of Energy EERE |
| Menghaney, Moksha | University of Michigan |
| Mills, Sarah | University of Michigan |
| Murphy, Tom | Penn State University |
| Ogle, Tamara | Purdue University |
| Pham, Carlotta | University of Michigan Facilitator |
| Reilly, Mary | Michigan State University |
| Solomon, Jay | University of Illinois |
| Verhey-Henke, Ann | University of Michigan Facilitator |
| Webb, Danielle | USDA - Rural Development |
| Wilcox, Michael | Purdue University |
| Wilson, Dahvi | Apex Clean Energy |
| Wyckoff, Mark | Michigan State University (Emeritus) |