

## Tips for Leveling the Field:

### Helping Non-Technical Stakeholders Get Engaged

Planning and implementing solar energy systems is undeniably technical. When we consider how to deploy solar at the community-scale, we need to consider how systems will be designed, how they will connect to the grid, buying and selling energy credits, complex financing mechanisms, and tax policy.

While it's important to engage stakeholders who have expertise in these areas, it's often critical to also engage stakeholders who bring expertise in other areas such as social services, historic preservation, community development and planning, community sustainability, and other issues of importance to community residents. To ensure that all stakeholders can fully participate, bring their ideas to the table, and contribute to your process, here are some tips for leveling the field and ensuring the inclusion of less technically oriented stakeholders:

#### 1. Mind the Vocabulary

Like many technical topics, solar has its own vocabulary and list of common acronyms. You may not realize it, but your conversation may sound like another language to some of your stakeholders. To overcome this challenge, minimize the use of acronyms and jargon (and ensure that the acronyms you use are defined). Consider creating a glossary of terms for your stakeholders

#### 2. Provide Pre-Meeting Materials

Consider providing educational materials prior to each meeting that stakeholders can use to quickly familiarize themselves with the issues that will be discussed. There are a wide variety of materials available online. Keep in mind that people learn in different ways. Try to provide information in a variety of formats (written word, visual/infographic, spoken word) and via multiple platforms (video, recorded webinars, written reports, issue briefs, slide decks, etc.). Aim to include infographics or other visual depictions of technical information as much as possible.

#### 3. Offer "Boot Camp" Training

If you have several stakeholders that would benefit, consider offering a short series of meetings, webinars or even day-long intensive, preparatory session.

## 4. Structure Your Meetings to Engage Everyone

There are lots of great facilitation techniques that can be used to help equalize a discussion and to ensure that you are drawing on the diverse expertise of all your stakeholders. Here are a few ideas:

- Consider breaking into discussion groups rather than have one big discussion.
- Following a presentation, ask everyone to take a minute to write down a few questions or reflections before you start taking questions. This ensures that everyone has a chance to gather their thoughts. Another technique is to have people briefly share those reflections with someone sitting by them before opening up the conversation.
- Build an agenda that features a diversity of expertise. The solar experts in your group likely have a lot to learn from stakeholders with expertise in economic development, historic preservation, land use, etc.

## 5. Check In with Your Stakeholders

The best way to find out if a stakeholder feels comfortable and included is to ask. A quick phone call from time-to-time provides an opportunity to check in and make sure they have the information they need and are feeling engaged.