Virginia residents of Bath, Allegheny, Highland, Augusta and Rockbridge counties are now served by 550KW of shared solar, through the construction of a 1750 panel community solar garden owned and maintained by BARC Electric Cooperative. The garden is fully subscribed, serving 212 local subscribers (203 residential and nine commercial customers).

Subscribers purchase “energy blocks” of 50kWh at a cost of $4.95 per block each month. Initially, subscribers pay a $0.02 premium for their energy, but with fixed rate for 20 years, savings are expected within five years. Additionally, the customers have no upfront costs associated with their subscription and a portion of their subscription goes into a special fund to pay for project expansion.

Part of the appeal of BARC’s subscription model is the flexibility, with 12-month periods that renew automatically each year. If customers wish to opt out at the end of each 12-month period, there is no penalty. Moreover, subscriptions are portable within BARC territory. Should a customer leave the BARC service territory, their subscription goes to the next person on the waiting list. Residential and commercial customers can purchase blocks representing up to 25% of their annual consumption (this cap prevents a single subscriber from consuming too much of the project).

The $1.4 million project was funded by grants from the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) and the Appalachian Regional Commission, along with a loan from the Department of Energy’s New Clean Renewable Energy Bonds (NCREBs) program. The array was commissioned by Governor Terry McAuliffe on August 29, 20161 and future plans for the array involve expanding on the current footprint in order to make more subscriptions available to customers in the BARC service area.

Lessons Learned

Understandable Messaging

Energy can be a daunting topic for many customers. Therefore, BARC wanted to make their messaging surrounding the community solar garden and its offerings as simple as possible. Using bold, concise visuals outlining an abbreviated version of the key messages, creating the concept of “energy blocks” as opposed to kilowatt-hour subscriptions, and crafting marketing that was easily digestible by all customers, BARC was able to successfully market community solar to their customers. Moreover, by recognizing that fixed energy costs resonated most with the audience, BARC was able to emphasize this aspect of the project in its messaging.

Continued Customer Engagement

BARC’s initial success in selling all of the subscriptions for the community solar garden was directly attributable to clear, concise, and targeted marketing. Continuing that engagement with the customers, however, is key to ensuring sustained interest and awareness in the project. BARC discovered that when it reduced its messaging efforts after its initial sell-out, subscription interest trailed-off over time, although this could have been a result of the announcement that the garden was sold out. Keeping interest high through continued messaging and engagement with current and potential subscribers is a key element to ensuring that there will be a large subscriber pool for future project expansion.

Project Visibility Helps

BARC found that an important element of gaining and keeping customer interest in a community solar project was siting the project where customers could see it. When customers see where their energy is coming from, they feel more invested in the project. It also provides an educational resource for local residents to learn about solar and how it is both generated and transmitted. Keeping energy generation local also helps customers feel connected to the generation source and the resource. Therefore, BARC decided to construct the community solar garden at their headquarters in an area highly visible to passing traffic.