

Why Community Feedback?

In 2016 Community Energy Project (CEP) was brought in as a stakeholder to advise rule-makers and partners about low income (LI) engagement and Community Solar (CS) in SB 1547, which states that 10% of the energy produced by CS projects must benefit LI households. CEP serves over 1,200 LI households a year with energy and safety services, 60% of whom are people of color. As we became more involved with discussions with other stakeholders, we found many uninformed assumptions being made about those experiencing low-income, and those assumptions were being used to advise policy. We're there to help ensure that the service is valuable and accessible.

Community Solar has exciting potential for LI households - it can be divided into subscriptions, giving participants potentially significant discounts on their bills for up to 10 years. This can reduce reliance on energy assistance, increase economic resiliency, and decrease the stress of poverty, connecting new groups with larger causes like climate change, renewable energy, and green-collar jobs. CS is off-site, meaning it circumnavigates barriers to rooftop solar common to low-income homeowners, such as like deteriorating roofs and future maintenance issues around the installation itself, like the inverter.

We received a grant through Bonneville Environmental Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust to deliver education to tenants in low-income housing where solar panels were being installed. This allowed us to take part in advocacy work and to develop a training to deliver to LI households, which required some market research.

In rule-making discussions, one common belief we heard was that LI people are “too in crisis to care” about environmental issues, and therefore will not be motivated to support solar on those grounds, despite large-scale studies on the topic stating the contrary.* We asked 87 people engaged in our programs their thoughts about climate change, air and water quality, affordable energy, green jobs, and potential barriers to participation in solar in order to:

- Ensure accurate representation in advocacy work
- Gauge baseline knowledge and interest to create high-impact community education
- Share understanding of disadvantaged groups with decision-makers
- Create opportunities for new groups to advocate for themselves

The Participants

We utilized some of our current infrastructure to gather feedback from our own clients. To ensure as much random sampling as possible, we purposefully prioritized audiences that did not self-select as having an interest in solar. We conduct annual follow-up surveys with Weatherization and Lead Poisoning Prevention workshop participants, and simply added additional questions about solar.

Constructing Hope was a partner that held in-person focus group discussions with those hoping to enter the trades. Their participants are almost exclusively male, with 40% of the participants having been incarcerated, and the rest having had legal issues and experience living in poverty. They were the majority of the focus group participants.

87 Participants surveyed in the following ways:

- Focus Groups
- Phone Surveys
- Online Surveys

Participants were:

- Those with low incomes (under 80% Median Family Income, most participants are under 30%)
- People of color
- Constructing Hope pre-apprentice trainees

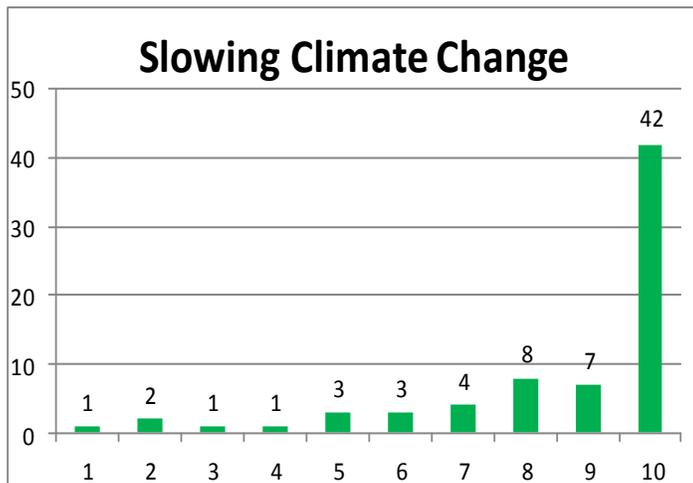
*See last page for examples

RESULTS: Environmental Issues

Importance on scale of 1-10

To avoid creating bias, groups were given minimal information on the topic, including general solar and environmental concept definitions. We then asked participants how they rated topics based on the question “How important is the following topic to you?” We did not correct misinformation and with in-person discussions, debate among participants was encouraged.

Participants rated the question on a scale of one to ten, ten being the most important. They did not have to rank them in comparison to other topics, but rated each as a stand alone item. We wanted to gauge values of participants and get a sense of what would make compelling messages for future marketing. Focus groups had flip books they held up for everybody to see, and once responses were recorded we discussed why they chose their answer.



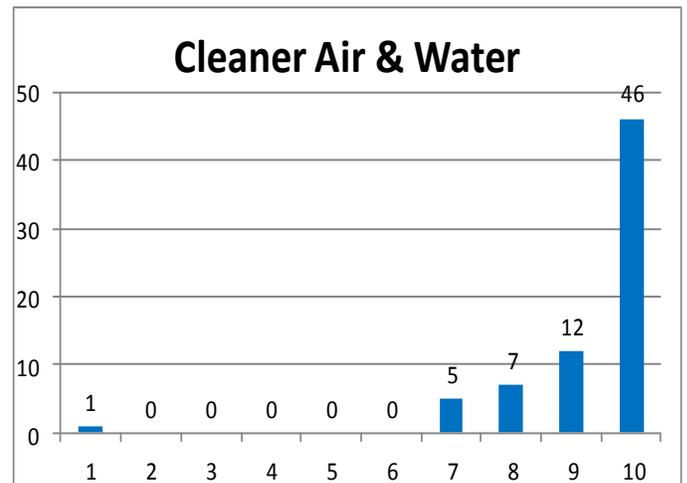
Why did you choose your score?

“Long-term it’ll have a huge effect on us, as we live on earth with everything else. Stuff is happening so fast, this needs to be important. Try to make an effort, for our kids.”

“Science says we’ve had a lot of trends - but this is unprecedented and monumental. The ramifications are devastating in ways we can’t even comprehend yet.”

“HAS to slow down, but at the same time, people are hungry and homeless today.”

“Survival (of all living things) is jeopardized. Explain why you didn’t try to slow it down to future generations.”



Why did you choose your score?

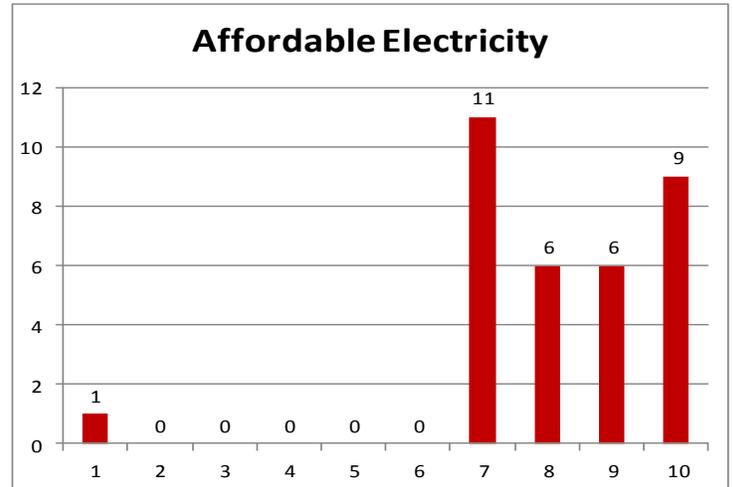
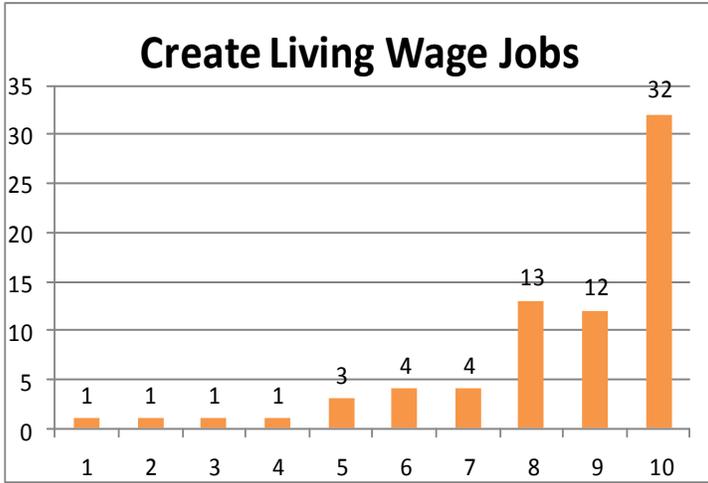
“Humans need air and water to survive. And animals, like whales and bees who are more sensitive than we are in danger. We rely on these animals for survival - we’re all in a chain and when a serious link breaks it all falls apart.”

“Where I’m from, coal mining is a big deal. But it’s very destructive -flash flooding, cancer. I lost four family members to cancer. It wasn’t until I came to the PNW that I realized people don’t die as often here, and I know it’s because of the coal - what it does to the air and water.”

“With water the more contaminated it is the more people get sick. Air pollution makes it really hard to breath and live without health problems.”

A small debate broke out about whether or not it was too late to stop climate change, if climate action should be a priority. One participant ended the discussion: “I have a little daughter. What am I supposed to do, look her in the eye years from now and say everything went to hell because I didn’t even want to try? I’d be ashamed to say that.”

RESULTS: Social Issues



Why did you choose your score?

“Many jobs are created in rural areas but the people there aren’t qualified for the jobs so do not benefit.”

“If people can support themselves with good jobs they can invest their time in other things, like community projects and themselves.”

“When you’re low-income you put money into industries that don’t produce living wages. Like fast food places vs food carts - if I have good wages then I can support more expensive, ethical options. The middle class is shrinking and this cycle of cheap goods just creates cheaper wages. When you’re in poverty you create more poverty for other people living in poverty with limited choices. Living wage jobs create an upward spiral to reverse that.”

Why did you choose your score?

Common answers were around saving money, linking this to the housing crisis and health issues associated with the stress of poverty. There were several debates about whether electricity is a right or privilege.

“The true cost in natural resources and pollution is more important to me, dollar amount matters but not as much.”

“As current resources are depleted, the price of electricity will continue to rise.”

“Electricity should be created for all in a way that it creates change for the better through the ability to harness and use at the time when resources allow it.”

Discussion: Paying for Solar & Contracts

A common argument in CS discussions is that LI households should pay for solar subscriptions, just at a lower rate than other subscribers to ensure they have “skin in the game.” We asked participants if they were willing or able to pay for a subscription, and what that amount would be realistic. We found they were open to the idea, but were extremely reluctant to commit to paying anything until they had many legitimate questions resolved. Participants wanted to know about the return on their investment, if there was financing available, how it would be impacted by and/or impact their credit rating, how issues like homelessness, eviction, moving, and energy assistance would affect a contract, and what penalties would be associated.

There was hesitation around signing 10-year contracts as well:

“Contracts are made for lawyers and companies benefit. It never protects the little people, it only exploits them.”

Participants said that 10 years was a long time if you tend to move frequently, either willingly (“as a young person”) or unwillingly (due to evictions or financial hardship).

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Community Solar and Low-Income

We were unsurprised to find that participants cared a great deal about the same topics that move middle and upper-income people to take part in renewable energy, as this lines up with our years of experience working with LI communities. For program delivery to be successful, a program must be appealing, accessible, and supported by trusted organizations. This is up to program designers to determine, not potential participants.

It is critical that we reduce barriers and eliminate risk to allow LI households to take part in this exciting new opportunity. Income level is intersectional, meaning the LI experience is different for people of color, immigrants, women, people with disabilities, etc. To serve our truly vulnerable, equity needs to be a factor in all LI services.

We would like to minimize or eliminate:

- Any up-front costs for LI households to take advantage the program.
 - ◊ Nonprofits serving LI clients will be more likely to connect clients with risk-free services. Fewer funds will need to be spent educating participants on the outcomes of their investments.
- Intimidating processes that reduce participation among our most vulnerable community members:
 - ◊ Long-term contracts that bind a participant to an entity that will either punish the participant for things beyond their control (like eviction) or will intimidate, alienate, participants for something that can't be enforced anyway. Excessive income-verification can also disenfranchise groups.

The Need to Engage

Why is it so important to engage disadvantaged communities? Because they are critical to the success of any worldwide environmental movement. Climate change is a massive ship that cannot alter course with a tiny rudder of environmentalists with higher incomes. Strapped to the stern is a massive, underutilized rudder of people with low and moderate incomes, people of color, people with disabilities, immigrants, rural communities, etc. who do not need to be convinced of *why* we should utilize solar, only that **they do, indeed, have a role to play.**

To create **realistic, accessible opportunities** for people with limited financial means to realistically take part in the renewable energy movement we need to work with community-based organizations who have missions centered on environmental preservation *and* social service to help identify barriers that limit involvement, and to learn that there are programs that can provide additional assistance to their participants. When solar can provide monetary benefit for LI people the same way it does for those with higher income, it can create economic resiliency within these communities, and provide an obvious, tangible connection to the topic.

Make Programs Accessible

Simple. Easy to understand, easy to read, and already established.

Trusted. Earn trust by working with groups that have relationships with target communities.

Adaptable. You don't know what you don't know. Be humble and ready to adapt a program as new realizations arise.

Flexible. Go to the participants, don't make them come to you. Work evenings and weekends.

Equitable. Are there people you're missing? Prioritize new partnerships, outreach methods, hiring practices.

Positive. Ensure that participants enjoy interacting with your organization. Address workplace culture issues - compassion fatigue, bad attitudes, stereotypes, and poor treatment of vulnerable people.

*Disadvantaged communities and opinions about climate change:

<http://climatescience.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228620-e-412>

http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/02/12/how-different-groups-think-about-scientific-issues/pi_2015-02-12_science-issues-06/

<http://www.randalolson.com/2014/09/13/who-are-the-climate-change-deniers/>