Solar Workgroup for Solar Development in Southwest Virginia

September 19, 2017
Meeting Summary

Background

The sixth in a series of meetings of the Solar Workgroup for Solar Development in Southwest Virginia was held on September 19th, 2017 at the Recreational Building in St. Paul, Virginia. Five previous in-person meetings of the Workgroup were held in October 2016, November 2016, February 2017, April 2017, and May 2017. Additional conference calls of the Workgroup were held in the winter of 2016-2017 around prioritizing sites for solar development in SWVA as well. Previous meeting summaries can be found on the website: http://swvasolar.org. The next phase of the Workgroup was a central focus of this meeting, including a presentation on the draft Roadmap for solar development in SWVA as well as on the SolSmart program.

Meeting overview

This Workgroup meeting focused on discussing the Roadmap draft and the next phase of the Workgroup. Meeting participants (listed at the end of the summary) shared ideas of how to move ambassador projects forward for solar project development, how to expand the outreach approach for the effort, and how to make the most of the SolSmart opportunity with counties in SWVA.

Solar Workgroup updates included:

- The DIY Solar Workshop will be held on November 4th from 9 am - 1 pm at Mountain Empire Community College.
- The 40+ sign-ups have been received for Solarize Wise to date.
- SolSmart rollout is happening in Russell County, Wise County and beyond.

All participants received a copy of the Executive Summary for the Roadmap. Several copies of the Roadmap draft, the Economic Analysis, and the Site Assessments were available as well, which were developed by Workgroup members and consultants (see below for more information and links to documents). After the opening welcome and introductions led by the meting facilitator, Christine Gyovai, Becki Joyce of UVa-Wise then presented on the SolSmart program.

SolSmart in Southwest Virginia

Becki Joyce and Adam Wells shared information about the SolSmart program and how it works, including these highlights:

- SolSmart is a national designation program funded by the US Department of Energy.
- Russell County passed a resolution to support SolSmart criteria and is now active in the designation application process.
- Wise County is pursuing possible designation next, having expressed interest and support. The idea of the designation is to foster growth of the solar market in the US.
- SolSmart makes solar project development more accessible through simplifying permitting and fees locally.
    - Zoning is one tool to give tax breaks and incentives to encourage energy-progressive businesses into the area and existing businesses to go solar.
- Becki stressed that the program is about looking at how coal-mining jobs can transfer to solar jobs in fields such as electrical, HVAC, and plumbing, but not about replacing coal-related jobs. Only one other Virginia County has the SolSmart designation – Albemarle.

Additional information about SolSmart

"SolSmart provides recognition and no-cost technical assistance to help local governments reduce barriers to solar energy growth. With the help of our team of national and local experts, cities, counties, and towns are cutting red tape to make it easier for homes and businesses to go solar. Local governments that achieve these goals are eligible for SolSmart designation, providing national recognition that they are "open for solar business." By encouraging solar energy development at the local level, SolSmart helps local governments bring new businesses to their community, promote economic growth, and foster the creation of new jobs.

SolSmart is funded by the U.S. Department of Energy SunShot Initiative and supports its goal of making it faster, cheaper, and easier to go solar." http://www.gosparc.org

Discussion following the SolSmart presentation included the following points:

- A participant inquired, "what if we become a solar-designated region?" The participant noted that this would be a lot more powerful than applying as a sole county, and could make the most of having a technical advisor available that would work directly with the communities on permitting and zoning. Several Workgroup members agreed with this suggestion about pursuing region-wide certification, and agreed that it would be worth pursuing as an activity of the Workgroup.
- SolSmart encourages communities to streamline solar development, by making it easy for businesses to go solar. The technical assistance portion of the program frees up community staff in dealing with navigating the zoning technicalities.
- A Workgroup participant voiced concern that after six months or so of the program, no one would be in charge of moving the program forward, so it would get dropped. There is a need to plan for continuity
- Another participant asked who was paying for SolSmart. Becki answered that the program is federally-financed and free to participants.
- The suggestion was made that the region could stagger the designation process: 2-3 counties work on their application at a time, so that an expert would be available to the region for an entire year. This idea received support within the group. Another person suggested that the SolSmart initiative involve the two regional planning districts (such as NOVA Regional Commission). Even if Tazewell County has no zoning, SolSmart could be a proactive zoning endeavor.

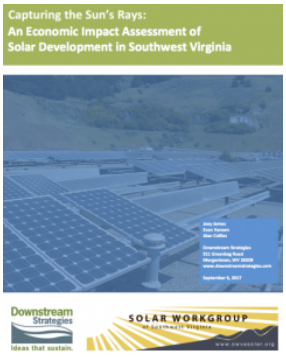
Roadmap Draft Discussion

After the SolSmart discussion, Adam Wells and Matt Wasson of Appalachian Voices presented the draft *Roadmap for Solar Development in SWVA* created by the Solar Workgroup planning team. The executive summary draft may be found here. First, Adam gave a background summary of the Roadmap development, and then noted that the planning team is seeking feedback from Workgroup members on the draft before it is finalized.

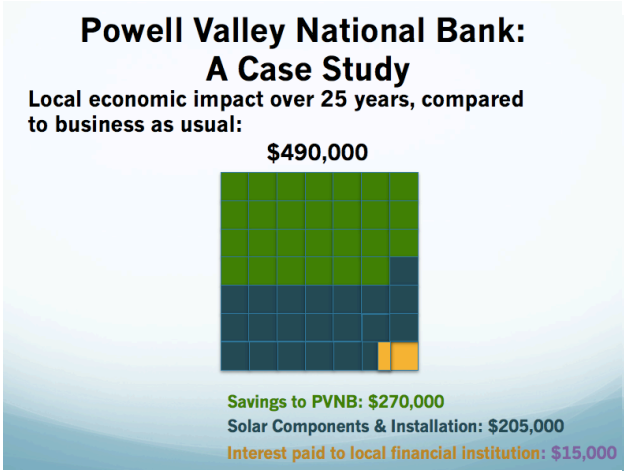
Adam noted that previously, the Workgroup prioritized having an independent economic analysis conducted, particularly around job creation as it related to solar, as well as moving forward with solar development on key sites that could serve as ambassador projects. Subsequently, a RFP (Request-for-Proposals) was released, and a Workgroup committee selected Downstream Strategies and Ecological Energy Systems to conduct the Economic Analysis and site assessments.

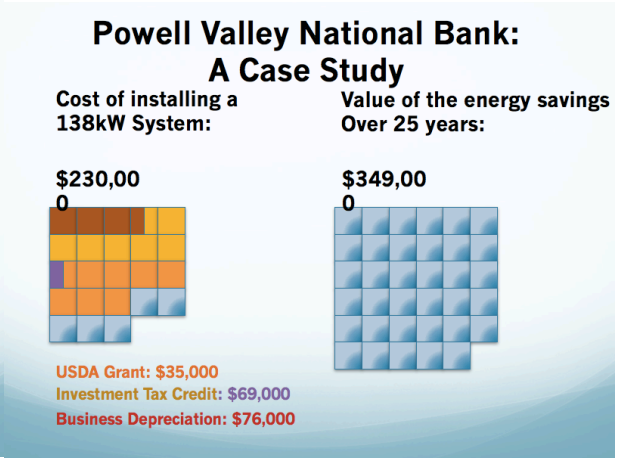
After Adam presented the background of the development of the Roadmap, Christine presented the current wording of the four Workgroup goals, and reminded the participants that wording can change if suggestions arise from Workgroup members.

Then, Matt Wasson shared an update on the 15 prospective ambassador sites, which were prioritized from a much broader list generated by Workgroup members of sites throughout far Southwest Virginia. Of the sites selected, ten sites are public schools and five are private businesses. Downstream Strategies finished the site assessments and an economic analysis for the Solar Workgroup, and they are available on the website http://swvasolar.org and at the links above. Matt noted that the data from Downstream Strategies allowed the Workgroup to look at how many jobs can be created and what benefits would impact business owners. This information will be used to continue to prioritize future sites.



Matt presented a sample site assessment for Powell Valley National Bank, which has turned out to be one of the most viable projects. Matt noted that based on rooftop area, a138kW system would cost $230,000 to build. Over 25 years, this would result in $350,000 in savings. They would be eligible for a REAP grant, an investment tax credit, USDA grants, and would be eligible for writing off depreciation. Matt further said that a lot of the cost would be recuperated with savings.





Matt commented that the feasibility and immediate savings for private businesses is a lot more straight-forward than for public institutions, and that nonprofits are a different picture. They can't use tax credits or USDA grants. 25 years down the road, they'd only a little bit ahead with savings. If a grant or up-front capital can be identified, it addresses the problem. Downstream Strategies came up with a 10-year scenario for site assessment, and found that with all sites developed, there would be 230 jobs created, 20 of those in residential sector, and 191 would be in utility scale. Matt noted that the Workgroup would need to look at all three sectors together. Questions from meeting participants on goal 1 (site development) included:

- One participant asked if Downstream Strategy's estimate included maintenance and other costs. Matt said yes, that they constructed a very conservative model. The projected benefits do not include larger economic activity and impacts that could result from solar development such as attracting other businesses.
- One participant commented: "Just looking at the map, I would like to see more sites in eastern coal counties like Russell County. Several schools have flat roofs but some are pitched. I love the idea of schools implementing solar project to address school's financial challenges."
- Another participant agreed that it's disappointing that public benefits currently primarily go to businesses. Additional participants noted that public sites should be pursued as much as possible, with panels that are publically accessible, and to connect outreach and educational opportunities to sites as much as possible, such as around STEM.
- There needs to be a list of what kinds of classes need to be taught, as well as identifying the gaps in educational offerings and needs.
    - Identify the solar job training needs (note that HVAC installers have some relevant training)

Following this update, Matt and Adam reviewed the priority action items for Workgroup goals 1-3, found in the Executive Summary with the following discussion points from participants related to each Action item, and with Kate Boyle presenting on goal 4.

Goal 1 updates: Ambassador Sites

Goal 1 Action Items:

- Develop ambassador sites.
- Focus on projects that have strong marketing and public relations components.
- Identify financing options.
- Continue to build solar inventory.

Goal 1 – Discussion points (see above)

Goal 2 updates: Workforce Development

Goal 2 Action Items:

- Supporting partnership between educational institutions and solar installers to coordinate training.
- Connect existing businesses with resources to go solar.
- Develop a feasibility study solar component manufacturing in SWVA.

Goal 2 – Discussion points

- How can we scale up "Learn and Earn?"
    - What resources exist to fund the "Earn" part?
    - How can more structure and predictability be ensured for participants?
- How do we encourage local entrepreneurs/ existing contractors to "go solar"?
- What would a feasibility study on manufacturing look like?
- One participant noted a concern about developing solar programs with the community colleges. If a program is solely focused on solar, it might not be promising enough for the student to pursue. If they don't get jobs in the area, the program won't get funded. The program would need to show that it's working with existing vocations and job opportunities to succeed.

Goal 3 updates: Education & Outreach

Goal 3 Action Items:

- Conduct community-wide solar education outreach events and programs.
- Pursue SolSmart designation across region.
- Connect specific groups with the right financing options and other information.
- Collaborate with regional educational institutions.

Goal 3 – Discussion points

- A participant commented that schools can use energy and support but are also primed to be an outreach and educational asset. Solar can be an instructional tool, and opportunities should be explored for sharing information at energy fairs, ag and farm days, etc. On October 5th, there will be an energy expo at Ridgeview with

DMME. The Solar workgroup might want to be there to share information with the 6th graders.

Kate presented the draft on policy recommendations in Goal 4 of the Roadmap. Kate commented that the solar industry needs to grow by addressing existing barriers.

Goal 4 updates: Policy

Goal 4: Policy Recommendations

- Remove restrictions on net metering.
- Expand community solar.
- Expand access to Power Purchase Agreements for net metering.
- Fund the Virginia Solar Energy Development and Energy Storage Authority.
- Increase access to tax incentives.
- Utilize pump storage for increased solar in Southwest Virginia.

Goal 4 – Discussion points and next steps:

- Schedule a briefing call with the Southern Environmental Law Center, Appalachian Voices, and others familiar with solar policy, extending an invitation to counties to follow up on policy development opportunities.
- Schedule a meeting with Workgroup members to meet with Terry Kilgore and other local elected officials to grow awareness and opportunities for solar.
- Engage local lobbyists in solar development.
- Look at opportunities for the November legislative breakfast and January general assembly meeting.
- Focus on pump storage as a policy issue.
- Look at opportunities to have discussions with groups in northern Virginia that are working on storage and solar.
- Additional information about possibility for solar power buy-back would be helpful.
- A participant asked what the high level barriers are to net metering are. Kate responded that utilities are required to offer net metering and programs, but it is inconsistently used across companies. There is a need to try to decrease fees; currently, when excess power is generated, the homeowner gets a credit on their bill or compensation. Also, on the system-side, system size caps are more restrictive than other states. Also, overall programming of net metering is also capped. If more people did residential solar they could reach that cap, and new customers would be blocked. The cap is calculated based on size of utility. There is a group of stakeholders working on solar policy, and they have identified these priorities. There is a need to stay proactively engaged around solar policy development.

Key questions & Next steps for the Workgroup

After a discussion about each of the goal areas, Christine posted the following questions to the Workgroup for discussion around next steps:

1) What ideas do you have to move forward with workforce development?

2) Ideas to implement solar projects?

3) Ideas for next steps for the Workgroup?

Workgroup members shared the following ideas and suggestions around the key question areas above.

Future Format of the Solar Workgroup

Key points and ideas:

- A project developer could help move the ambassador sites forward and create ongoing cohesion. There was strong support for this idea.
    - The group noted the need to understand the specific challenges of solar development for schools since school systems often can't afford to pay for them. There is a need to find funding and prove benefits in a short time frame; 25 years is too long.
- Workgroup members like the current Workgroup format and would like to see it continue, but might want to include more experts and get business and industry at the table.
- Creating handouts and a handout for Workgroup members to outreach to legislators would be useful.
- Outreach to legislators could include the breakfast, tabling, and direct outreach by various Workgroup members.
- Getting solar to schools is a priority and finding shorter-term benefits may help secure funding.
- A mobile solar unit such as SPARC-E would be a great educational and outreach tool.
- Identifying a pro-solar stance in government officials and candidates would be useful.
    - Building on legislative outreach, a few Workgroup members agreed that we need an outreach plan and to implement it immediately; there is a need to go into meetings with legislators prepared. Workgroup members could go to group events such as the legislative breakfast and general assembly gathering for SWVA in January, and communicate with counties and local officials to gain local support as well.

The meeting wrapped up with a Planning Team meeting from 5:00 – 6:00 pm to plan next steps of the Workgroup, which was open to all Workgroup members. Workgroup members are encouraged to stay tuned via email and the website for future calls of the Workgroup (a conference call will be held in late October).

Meeting Participants

1. Jim Baldwin, Cumberland Plateau PPC
2. Stan Botts, SWVA Technology Council
3. Kate Boyle, Appalachian Voices (by phone)
4. Brad Kreps, The Nature Conservancy (by phone)
5. Emily Carlson, assistant, Dialogue + Design Associates

6. Susan Copeland, VCEDA
7. Denechia Edwards, Dickenson County Schools
8. Christine Gyovai, facilitator, Dialogue + Design Associates
9. Becki Joyce, UVa-Wise
10. Josh Sawyers, St. Paul Town Council
11. Kathy Stewart, St. Paul Main Street
12. Mike Thompson, Tazewell County IDA
13. Lou Wallace, St. Paul Tomorrow and Russell Co. Supervisor
14. Matt Wasson, Appalachian Voices
15. Adam Wells, Appalachian Voices