Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia

SolSmart program kick-off and utility-scale solar meeting

Meeting Summary

January 15, 2019

Executive Summary

The Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia (SWVA) held a meeting on January 15, 2019 at UVa-Wise with both an in-person and call-in option to the meeting. The Workgroup is co-convened by the UVA-Wise Office of Economic Development & Engagement, People Inc. and Appalachian Voices, with facilitation assistance from Dialogue + Design Associates. A list of participants may be found at the end of the meeting summary. More information is also available at www.swvasolar.org, which also has a link to sign up for the Workgroup email list.

The meeting included a presentation from Jack Morgan with the National Association of Counties (NACo) and Gary Hearl, SolSmart Advisor, regarding the SolSmart program in SWVA, and a discussion of utility-scale solar efforts in SWVA. Next steps include:

- Gary will be in touch with each city, town, and county participating in the SolSmart program, prioritizing the adoption of solar ordinances.
- Gary will be scheduling a SolSmart workshop within the next month.
- The next Workgroup meeting is scheduled for 1:00 - 3:00 pm on Wed. February 20th in Lebanon and will likely include an update on SolSmart and a presentation from a manufacturer of racking equipment for solar panels.
- Sample solar ordinances and related materials will be provided to Workgroup members.
- The Solar Workgroup is working on the next Commercial Solar RFP; If anyone has a building or project that could be part of the 2019 cohort, contact Adam Wells at adam@appvoices.org.

Meeting overview

At the beginning of the meeting, Adam Wells of Appalachian Voices, the meeting facilitator, welcomed participants to the meeting and reviewed the agenda. Following participant introductions, Adam provided an overview of the history of the Workgroup and progress thus far, including:

- The Workgroup has held regular meetings since 2016, and received Appalachian Regional Commission POWER Grant funding to develop to develop the Roadmap to Accelerate the Solar Industry in Far Southwest Virginia.

- After Roadmap publication, the Workgroup has moved to implement the action items identified in the Roadmap.
- In 2018, the Workgroup issued an RFP to install solar systems on key commercial sites throughout SWVA. Selected developer Northeast Construction (NCI) is currently working to finalize contracts and install 7 solar projects.

Anyone who is not currently on the Workgroup email list can go to the website to sign up.

SolSmart Discussion

Next, Jack Morgan of the National Association of Counties (NACo) provided an overview of the SolSmart program, which is funded by the US Department of Energy and administrated by a team of organizations lead by the Solar Foundation. Jack's presentation included the following highlights:

- The Solar Workgroup has done great work to promote solar in the SWVA region. There is a strong connection between the Workgroup's goals and SolSmart. The goal of SolSmart is to make it easier and more affordable for people to go solar. Participation in SolSmart demonstrates to solar developers and businesses that your community is open to solar development.
- SolSmart provides communities with no-cost technical assistance, provided by The Solar Foundation, NACo, and other agencies. Points are awarded to participating communities that meet certain criteria and best practices, and those points accumulate to determine what level of designation the community receives.
- SolSmart targets the "soft costs" (non-hardware costs including overhead costs, permitting, interconnection, sales, and marketing) of solar development. The cost of solar has been declining every year in the US, but compared to other countries, the soft costs of going solar in the US are still significantly higher. Despite a 48% decline in the installed cost of solar since 2010, 64% of the cost of going solar are still attributable to soft costs. Reducing these soft costs can help local jurisdictions to increase solar jobs in the region.
- Core categories of point criteria include planning, permitting, and zoning designations. Communities work through a checklist of actions in order to achieve designations.
- Local governments have a significant role to play in reducing the soft costs of solar.

SolSmart technical advisor Gary Hearl will help the SWVA communities reach their designations. Gary's presentation included the following highlights:

- An overview of how communities can achieve designation. Gary will be working with the applicants in SWVA to work through the SolSmart criteria to gain the necessary points to achieve designation.
- Gary's experience includes developing and financing solar, energy storage, and wind projects across the country.
- Solar requires more labor compared to other energy resources. There are more jobs in the clean energy sector than in any other energy sector, so it is important to grow the solar industry in the SWVA region.

Gary raised the question to the local government representatives in the region: What are the challenges and opportunities for your jurisdiction, and what are your goals? Meeting participants shared the following feedback:

- Mike Hatfield of Wise County noted that Wise County's biggest opportunity is the technology park adjacent to the Lonesome Pine airport. There is a data center also interested in solar. Wise County is exploring creating a county office complex, which could be a good location for solar. Challenges include promoting solar for electricity with the community.
- Josh Sawyers with the Town of St. Paul stated that St. Paul has a large manufacturing building sitting empty, and that it would be great if a business would come in and take advantage of it. St. Paul has a blank slate in terms of solar policies, which is an opportunity and a challenge. Josh expressed a need for a Solar 101 toolkit for communities.

Jack Morgan reiterated that the goal of the SolSmart program is to incorporate each jurisdiction's individual solar goals. Jack outlined the areas of "red tape" that are critical prerequisites within the SolSmart checklist, including:

- Creating solar permitting information and putting it on the city/county/town website.
- Reviewing current zoning requirements and removing any solar prohibitions.
- Committing to reducing other barriers to solar.

Jurisdictions should also consider:

- Working to change their regulations to ensure that applications for solar installation require no more than one application form per project.
- Reviewing solar permit fees for residential permits; train fire and safety staff;
- Creating clear guidance for solar in special districts such as historical districts, agricultural districts, or preservation zones.
- Creating a solar page on their websites where all things related to solar are located.
- Discussing community solar and shared solar with applicable utilities.

The group then discussed next steps for the SolSmart program.

- Gary will be in touch with each jurisdiction's representative for one-on-one meetings.
- Gary will be working the representatives to develop a solar and to consider which designation level the jurisdiction is seeking to achieve.
- Over the next several months, the focus will be on the foundational categories that must be achieved within the checklist, as those usually take the longest to implement.
- Gary will put together a SolSmart workshop within the next month for representatives from all jurisdictions to discuss the foundational categories that will require a similar process for each jurisdiction.

The group discussed the fact that major corporations like Microsoft and Amazon are interested in solar, and how the SolSmart program can help to attract these large employers. It was suggested that local government officials be pulled into any conversations about this possibility. It was also noted that Amazon is going to have difficulty filling jobs in its new headquarters in Virginia because there simply aren't enough people, and UVa-Wise is considering SWVA can

help fill the void, possibly with remote workers. UVa Wise is also interested in bringing solar manufacturing to the SWVA region, and technology work that supports the manufacturing.

Utility-Scale Solar Discussion

Adam Wells provided an update on the conversation the Workgroup has had to date related to utility-scale solar, including the following highlights:

- In the Fall of 2018, the Workgroup starting having more conversations focused on utility-scale solar.
- DMME has been working on a resource for mapping good sites for utility-scale solar installations.
- The Workgroup has discussed solar ordinances that are friendlier to utility-scale solar installations. This need will be addressed with the SolSmart initiative.
- The Workgroup has also discussed the difficulty of the terrain of SWVA; the land is not as flat as in other areas, and there is a need for adaptive racking components either brought into or manufactured in SWVA.
- While some conversations related to utility-scale solar are appropriate for the Workgroup, certain conversations required to move forward on this initiative involve proprietary information, so private conversations between developers, utilities, property owners, etc. will be necessary.

Next, Nick with DMME provided an update on the DMME mapping resource for siting utility-scale solar projects on abandoned mine lands (AML), as follows:

- The initial tool developed in spring 2018 had some shortcomings, and DMME has been working since then to refine the tool to make it more suitable for site selection on post mine lands, AML, and brownfields. DMME now has a much better understanding of what the top proprieties are for solar developers when they look at utility-scale solar development. The sweet spot is around 600-700 acres of land in close proximity (no more than 1 mile) to transmission lines.
- DMME has a list of 25-30 sites, and will narrow it down to 12-15. DMME will have to work through landowner and mineral rights and geological data. Once DMME has the final list, they will work with the utilities to determine whether or not the sites are indeed viable. Then, DMME will meet with developers and utilities.
- There is much more interest in developing these sites for solar than there was 2-3 years ago when DMME started the process.
- DMME has not yet had conversations with local government officials to see how these specific sites overlap or fit into local government comprehensive plans.

The group then discussed issue of passing ordinances to help utility-scale projects move forward efficiently.

- Kevin Comer described existing ordinances in Virginia counties, including the Rockingham County solar ordinance and the Augusta County solar ordinance, noting that the Rockingham County ordinance was generally good for solar development, and the Augusta County ordinance is a barrier to solar development. Rockingham's success was attributed to the fact that a stakeholder group was used to develop the ordinance, the process was a technical process rather than a political process, and the solar ordinance is

consistent with other aspects of the county's zoning code. For example, the setbacks for solar are the same as setbacks required for other similar types of uses.

- The group discussed the fact that there are many misconceptions about solar energy, and how to "debunk" these misconceptions. For example:
    - Glare is not an issue with solar -- there is actually less glare from solar than there is from water. Solar is installed at many airports without issue.
    - Noise from solar installations is not an issue; you may be able to hear the inverter if you are right next to it, but you cannot hear it from the road.
    - There are not safety issues related to voltage; solar installations have less voltage than the average transmission lines.
    - People often want to categorize solar installations as industrial land for the purposes of zoning, but it is very dissimilar to industrial land. It is a power source, but it doesn't need water or sewage connections, and they are not employment centers once installations are complete, so there are no transportation infrastructure issues.
- Buffer requirements should be considered carefully; for example, requiring trees as buffers may shade the solar panels and make them less efficient.
- It is best if the county/city/town ordinances in SWVA are as similar as possible to provide consistent regulations across the region, but the ordinances can't be exactly the same because different jurisdictions use different formats. As long as the major requirements, limitations, etc. are aligned, this works well for developers.

The Workgroup members will be provided with background information from universities regarding solar ordinance best practices, which can be used as an unbiased reference resource, as well as example ordinances.

Adam raised the issue of bringing solar manufacturing to the SWVA region. The Workgroup will be working on bringing a manufacturer that has a product well suited for the geography of the region that is interested in moving to the SWVA region to speak at the next meeting.

Through the Dominion Energy charitable foundation, this spring, there will be one school in each SWVA county and in Norton that will receive a 1.2 kW solar system to be used for education and training. An announcement is forthcoming.

Adam Wells noted that the Solar Workgroup will be doing at least one more commercial RFP, with a goal of completing the bid in 2019. If anyone has a building or project that could be part of the 2019 cohort, contact Adam Wells at adam@appvoices.org.

Meeting Participants

Jimmy Adkins, LENOWISCO Planning District Commission
Chelsea Barnes, Appalachian Voices
Stan Botts, SWVA Technology Center
Bob Burnley, Dominion advisor

Winifred Collins, City of Norton
Kevin Comer, Antares Group
Austin Counts, Appalachian Voices
Christine Gyovai, Dialogue + Design Associates
Mike Hatfield, Wise County
Gary Hearl, SolSmart
Dan Hunnicut, Rockbridge Energy
Brad Kreps, The Nature Conservancy
Robyn Lee, UVa-Wise and Go Virginia
Lonzo Lester, Russell County
Lena Lewis, The Nature Conservancy
Jack Morgan, National Association of Counties
Becki O'Quinn, UVa-Wise
Vivek Patil, Ascent Virginia
Nick Polier, DMME
Dan Poteet, Dominion Energy
Monty Salyer, Wise County and Town of St. Paul
Josh Sawyers, UVa-Wise and St. Paul
James Schroll, the Solar Foundation
Winifred Collins, City of Norton
Adam Wells, Appalachian Voices