



Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia Online Meeting Summary

June 24, 2020

Background and Meeting Overview

An online meeting of the Solar Workgroup took place on June 24, 2020. The Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia (Workgroup) is a group of nonprofit and community action agencies, colleges, state agencies, economic developers, and other interested citizens and businesses seeking to develop a renewable energy industry cluster in the seven coalfield counties of Southwest Virginia (SWVA). The workgroup was co-convened in 2016 by the UVA-Wise [Office of Economic Development & Engagement](#), [People Inc.](#) and [Appalachian Voices](#), with facilitation assistance from [Dialogue + Design Associates](#). The Planning Team includes co-conveners and the Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy, Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), and paleBLUEdot. Additional background information is available at www.swvasolar.org.

Read more about the [Solar Workgroup background and progress](#), and check out the [timeline and accomplishments infographic](#).

The June 24 Solar Workgroup online meeting focused on the refinement of the Workgroup's four goals and associated action strategies. During the online meeting, Nick Polier with the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy (DMME) and Mark Moormans with People Inc. provided partner updates on solar site work. Then, Adam Wells with Appalachian Voices gave a presentation that provided an overview of the Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia and key highlights from its activities over the past year. This was followed by an introduction to the Workgroup's four main goals and associated action strategies. Christine Gyovai of Dialogue + Design outlined the process for discussing these and refining them in small breakout groups.

After individuals selected their preferred goal area, call participants joined breakout rooms for 20-minute small group discussions about each of the Workgroup's four goals. In each breakout group, facilitators from the Workgroup's Planning Team led a discussion around refining that specific goal and captured top ideas to report back to the larger group. After reconvening in the main room, facilitators reported out the top ideas from their small group discussions. These suggestions and ideas will be used by the Planning Team to further refine the Workgroup's goals and action strategies to make them more relevant to the needs and interests of Workgroup members. Presentation slides from the meeting are available [here](#), and call participants are listed at the end of the summary.

Solar Workgroup Updates

At the beginning of the meeting, Christine Gyovai of Dialogue + Design Associates welcomed participants to the meeting and asked each person to identify their preferred Workgroup goal for small group discussions in breakout rooms that occurred later in the call.

Then, Nick Polier with the DMME and Mark Moormans with People Inc. gave the following partner updates on solar work sites:

- Nick Polier of DMME shared updates on a couple of projects in Southwest Virginia through DMME's programs. Wise County schools and Dickenson County schools have issued RFPs for Solar PV installation in conjunction with an energy efficiency project. Due to COVID-19 restrictions in the school districts, however, the schools have received their RFPs back but have not been able to progress any further. Currently, DMME is waiting for guidance from the Governor's Office and Department of Education on how to proceed. DMME has also received inquiries from other school districts and localities but they are in the same situation unable to proceed with COVID-19. Nick mentioned that Carrie Hearne, who is the Solar Program Coordinator for DMME, recently launched their SolSmart Outreach Program in conjunction with the University of Virginia and are in the process of reaching out statewide.
- Mark Moormans with People Inc. shared that their organization is one of the largest community action organizations in Virginia and one of their focus areas is affordable housing for economically disadvantaged families and individuals. They currently own over 1,000 units of affordable housing across the state and their goal is to bring solar to the multi- housing developments that they operate. The first effort was a 40-unit development called Norton Green in Norton, VA for low to moderate income elderly clients that was part of a first round of commercial scale RFP that the Solar Workgroup led several years ago. After running into significant legislative barriers that prevented them from moving forward, the Solar Workgroup engaged in policy work and advocacy and had a very productive last General Assembly session. As of July 1st, People Inc. is officially moving forward with the Norton Green project, and they are currently renegotiating the land lease for the site of the ground mount solar array that will provide power to the facility. People Inc. also has another facility in Washington County that they are currently working to put solar on as well.

Solar Workgroup Overview and Key Highlights

After partner updates, Adam Wells of Appalachian Voices gave a brief presentation on the background of the Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia and highlights from its activities over the past year. Presentation slides can be found [at this link](#). Key takeaways from the presentation are:

- The Solar Workgroup grew out of conversations at the 2016 Economic Forum at the University of Virginia Wise and exists today thanks to the contributions of its members.
- Adam highlighted the Workgroup's [Solar Roadmap for Southwest Virginia](#) and the [Economic Impact Analysis of Solar Development and Southwest Virginia](#), which were completed in 2017 funded by an Appalachian Regional Commission POWER technical

assistance grant. These documents, available at www.swvasolar.org, informed the development of the Solar Workgroup's current four goals and action strategies.

Adam introduced the Solar Workgroup's four goals, which were discussed in detail later in the call:

- **Goal 1:** Identify and develop sites that are ideal for solar development, especially solar “ambassador” projects.
- **Goal 2:** Grow workforce development and entrepreneurship opportunities to advance solar projects and maximize local benefit.
- **Goal 3:** Expand education and outreach in communities and with local leaders around solar benefits and opportunities.
- **Goal 4:** Promote policy changes that will help grow the solar industry in Southwest Virginia.

Finally, Adam shared a few highlights of the work that has come out of these goals. These include:

- At community level, the Workgroup is running two distinct residential solar programs that make it easier to go solar on a residential scale, and are in the middle of a third request for proposals to find solar installers.
- In 2017, the Solar Workgroup also held its first ever Solar Fair which drew over 200 people and was the launch of the first Solarize Program.
- SolSmart is a Department of Energy program that helps streamline the solar permitting process at the county level and provides technical assistance across all scales of installation.
- The Workgroup has made significant progress on policy during the last General Assembly passing laws that will open up third party financing to make solar more possible at scale.
- At the commercial scale, the Workgroup is in its third group purchase program.
- They are also looking at solar manufacturing in Southwest Virginia, with a focus on storage.

Questions and Answers

- Gerry Scardo asked if the Mineral Gap Data Center, located on a previous mine site, is still going to get solar and what the status of the project is. Adam confirmed that Sun Tribe Solar has a DMME grant and is moving forward with the project but has not yet broken ground.

Introduction to Solar Workgroup Goals and Overview of Small Group Discussions

After Adam's presentation, Christine introduced the Workgroup's four main goals and associated action strategies and outlined the process for how four small breakout groups would be used in Zoom to allow for Workgroup members to discuss and refine the language and key ideas surrounding their preferred goal and action strategies. Christine explained that each breakout group would have a facilitator from the Planning Team to lead the conversation, capture members' input and suggested edits, and report out the top ideas to the full Workgroup at the end of the meeting. Next, participants joined one of the four goal-specific breakout rooms for a 20- minute conversation. In each of the four goal-specific breakout rooms, participants discussed the following questions:

- How does this goal and actions need to be updated for 2020 and beyond?
 - What seems the most important to you?
 - How would you modify it, or what other actions might be needed?
 - Would you be willing to work on any items? If so, how?

Facilitators and notetakers from the Planning Team captured the discussion in google docs associated with each of the Workgroup's goals and participants identified 3-4 top ideas to report back to the large group during the last 10 minutes of the call. Content from each of the four goal-specific google docs and detailed discussion notes are available at the end of this meeting summary in Appendix A.

Top Idea Report Out to the Large Group

For the final ten minutes of the call, participants rejoined the main room for a discussion of the top ideas that emerged from discussions in each of the four goal-specific small groups. Each facilitator of the small group shared 3-4 suggestions or key ideas with the large group. These included:

- **Goal 1- Solar Site Development.**
 - Adam Wells facilitated this small group and summarized top ideas from Goal 1.
 - Getting projects built is still a huge priority.
 - There is still a need to provide resources to localities via SolSmart or some other way.
 - Particularly with utility-scale solar, localities play a major role in helping in identifying sites that need help with the process.
 - There is a need to provide localities with resources and understanding about engaging with utilities and how to deal with interconnections through SolSmart.
 - If the federal investment tax credit, which was 30% tax credit for solar, gets renewed it could be a big game changer for commercial scale solar and third party financing. Currently, this is in a piece of legislation for COVID recovery and is looking promising.
- **Goal 2- Workforce Development.**
 - Christine facilitated this small group and summarized top ideas for Goal 2.
 - This group discussed the interesting work that the Planning Team has been doing to make direct connections to local community colleges and small businesses. There has been a lot of outreach to these groups lately.
 - The Solar Workgroup can serve as a connector in an even greater capacity around resources, training, and opportunities for community college students interested in solar, new businesses starting up in the industry, etc.
 - The Workgroup should be the connective tissue between groups and businesses.
- **Goal 3- Outreach and Education.**
 - Austin Counts facilitated this small group and summarized top ideas from Goal 3.
 - Currently the Workgroup does a lot of outreach to general business owners,

but it could look into engaging specific industries more. For example, this could include reaching out to farmers or the dairy industry and connecting them to solar in a more direct way by educating them on how solar can help save them money in their businesses.

- Another idea is engaging an additional age group in solar through education by working with schools directly to organize school field trips and tours of DMME solar sites or residential solar sites. This was inspired by an enthusiastic discussion of the Solar Tours organized by the Workgroup last year.
 - The group also discussed the need to focus on talking about accessibility and the practical implications of solar such as savings vs. investment to help people understand that it is more accessible and economical than they might realize.
- **Goal 4 Policy.**
 - Chelsea Barnes facilitated this small group and summarized top ideas from Goal 4.
 - We need to add specific actions around brownfields and brightfields policy goals.
 - The Workgroup may need to expand or clarify action items around energy storage to ensure that this is an important part of advocating for energy policy.
 - There is currently one action strategy under Goal 4 related to the one of the various boards and authorities that have been created through the legislature, but the Solar Workgroup may need to do a refresh and look at action strategies that would tie into the specific actions we would like to see come from each of these governing bodies.
 - More funding is needed as well as other ways to incentivize what we want to see happen.

Following report outs of each group's top ideas, Dialogue + Design's team launched a poll requesting input from meeting participants about what goals and action strategies under each are most important to them. Due to technical issues and time constraints, meeting participants were unable to provide their input. Additional input from Solar Workgroup Members may be solicited during a future Solar Workgroup online meeting or by a survey circulated by email at a later date.

Upcoming Dates and Next Steps

- Christine invited meeting attendees to check out www.swvasolar.org to join the Solar Workgroup's email list and to share more ideas via the contact information listed there. Future meeting announcements will be shared via the email list.

Meeting Participants

1. Meade Anderson, Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
2. Chelsea Barnes, Appalachian Voices

3. Hannah Coman, Southern Environmental Law Center
4. Austin Counts, Appalachian Voices
5. Jason De La Cruz, Dominion Energy
6. Joe Godsey, Southwest Virginia Community College
7. Gary Hearl, Elevation Energy
8. Carrie Hearne, Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy (DMME)
9. David King, Abingdon, independent solar consultant
10. Brad Kreps, The Nature Conservancy
11. Lonzo Lester, Russell County, Administrator
12. Vince Maiden, Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
13. Ryan McAllister, Secure Futures Solar
14. Mark Moormans, People Inc.
15. Derek Moretz, Encore Renewable Energy, VT
16. Clark Phipps, LogistiCare
17. Nick Polier, Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy (DMME)
18. Ted Redmond, paleBluedot
19. Gerry Scardo
20. Tony Smith, Secure Futures Solar
21. Adam Wells, Appalachian Voices
22. Sierra Gladfelter, Dialogue + Design Associates (facilitator)
23. Christine Gyovai, Dialogue + Design Associates (facilitator)

Appendix A. Notes from Small Group Discussions

Solar Workgroup Meeting: Breakout Group 1 Goal 1 - Solar Site Development

Facilitator: Adam Wells, Appalachian Voices

Participants: Jason De La Cruz, Gary Hearl, Carrie Hearne, David King, Lonzo Lester, Ryan McAllister, Derek Moretz, Nick Polier, Tony Smith

Goal 1: Identify and develop sites that are ideal for solar development, especially solar “ambassador” projects.

Action Strategies:

A. Develop ambassador sites such as residential, commercial, and community-scale solar projects, later focusing on developing industrial-scale sites.

B. Develop ambassador projects that have strong marketing and public relations components to assist with community outreach and education.

C. Identify financing options for solar project development and clear mechanisms to access capital and project financing.

D. Create an inventory of possible sites for solar development in the seven coalfield counties of Southwest Virginia.

Suggested Planning Team Updates to Goal and Action Items:

- Delete Action A. Develop ambassador sites such as residential, commercial, and community-scale solar projects, and later focusing on developing industrial-scale sites.
- Change Action B. to Identify and develop high-impact solar projects that create sustainable local workforce opportunities such as residential, commercial, and community-scale solar projects, and later focusing on developing industrial-scale sites. Ideal sites have strong marketing and public relations components to assist with community outreach and education.
- Change Action D. to “Maintain an active inventory” instead of “Create an inventory”
- Change B to read “....community engagement...”

Discussion Notes:

- Tony: all strong goals. Goal B encompasses goal A, C and D. Making a project happen is a supernumerary. Community outreach is great, but is more like a one to many type of dissemination. Consider community engagement- getting more involved.
- David- action A and D should have top priority.
- Could amend B to develop ambassador projects across all 7 coalfield counties
- Nick- most thoughts centered around question 1: what seems most important is to develop the ambassador projects. Moving from ID’ing sites and maintaining a list, which we’ve done for years, but moving toward deployment. How can we empower localities to move forward with implementation. How can we assist localities? Prepare the environment.
- Carrie- Echo what Nick said, work with SolSmart program, taking communities to the next level to adopt revenue sharing/ help understand what they can expect with that program.

Also help industry get more familiar with the region, esp those who haven't worked in the region. Secondly, trying to focus on meeting and filling the understanding on how to engage with utilities and how the broader system looks like- how to navigate interconnections, understanding ratemaking process, etc. Need specific framework so that projects

- Gary: Echo what's been said. B and D are the important components. A lot of this will flesh out as well. Western Virginia will see development. Certain industry sectors are being focused on, with emphasis on resiliency. Would like to know-how do we see the RFP party will work with individual member epc firms- other firms will be out there developing sites- how do we coordinate? More developers like gary and tony- will be installing a large amount of solar over the coming months and years. Extension of ITC will be a big game changer. Can expect further solar incentives put into place. Carrie
- Jason- need to streamline working with localities on utility scale. Localities also help to id sites through IDA/EDA/PDC. E

Top ideas:

- Work with localities (via Solsmart/other ways) to provide TA, both on commercial and utility scale.
- Keep focus on ambassador sites
- And generally whatever it takes to get projects built to demonstrate benefits/feasibility.

Solar Workgroup Meeting: Breakout Group 2 Goal 2 - Workforce Development

Facilitator: Christine Gyovai, Dialogue + Design Associates

Participants: Ted Redmond, Sierra Gladfelter (facilitator)

Goal 2: Grow workforce development and entrepreneurship opportunities to advance solar projects and maximize local benefit.

Action Strategies:

A. Address the local workforce needs of the solar industry as well as the local need to create higher paying jobs through facilitating and supporting partnership between Southwest Virginia's educational institutions and solar installers.

B. Coordinate training opportunities developed between Mountain Empire Community College (MECC), solar installers, and the Solar Training Network,¹ such as a "learn and earn program," to provide students with "boots on the roof" training in installation (initially through the 2017 - 2018 Solarize Wise program).

C. Connect regional existing solar businesses with the Solar Training Network to develop on-the-job training programs.

D. Develop a feasibility study of photovoltaic panel manufacturing in Southwest Virginia.

Suggested Planning Team Updates to Goal and Action Items:

- Delete Action C.
- Replace "photovoltaic panel" with "solar supply chain" in Action D.

Discussion Notes:

- New residential solar group.
- The Workgroup should be playing a connective role between businesses in region
- Solar Training Network seems to be more for installers - believe this is a DOE-sponsored initiative.
- Don't delete Action C as action has been happening in this area. Clarify that it is about connecting regional solar businesses and as a reminder to continue to be a connector as more businesses and groups emerge.
- Connecting regional schools with businesses in a two-way street; relates to item B.
- Suggestion that the Workgroup could eventually evolve into something in Southwest Virginia like the Solar Energy Industry Association (SEIA), where they provide training, resources for contractors and businesses related to solar, and function as connective tissue between groups. Can educate people interested in solar jobs, connect them to community college opportunities, businesses installing solar in the region, etc. Also providing resources and a one-stop shop for businesses starting up in the region. There are many training and program possibilities, as well as education on how to plug into opportunities through DOE and other programs.

Solar Workgroup Meeting: Breakout Group 3 Goal 3 - Outreach and Education

Facilitator: Austin Counts, Appalachian Voices

Participants: Meade Anderson, Joe Godsey, Mark Moormans

Goal 3: Expand education and outreach in communities and with local leaders around solar benefits and opportunities.

Action Strategies:

A. Conduct community-wide solar education and outreach events (such as the May 2017 Solar Fair at UVA-Wise, the residential Solarize Wise model, and the SolSmart program).

B. Host tour events of solar residential, community, and utility solar facilities in Southwest Virginia.

C. Connect specific groups such as homeowners, nonprofits, businesses, and farmers with the appropriate tools for understanding and financing solar opportunities particular to their needs.

D. Collaborate with regional educational institutions to identify hands-on learning opportunities and build key partnerships.

Suggested Planning Team Updates to Goal and Action Items:

A. Conduct community-wide solar education and outreach events (such as solar facility tours, the 2017 Solar Fair, the residential Solarize model, and the SolSmart program) in order to build public awareness

C. Connect specific groups such as homeowners, nonprofits, businesses, and farmers with the appropriate tools for understanding and financing solar opportunities and energy efficiency practices particular to their needs.

D. Collaborate with regional educational institutions to identify hands-on learning opportunities and build key partnerships.

E. Build public awareness through sharing stories and examples of economic impact and savings; create opportunities for engagement with existing and potential solar policy.

Discussion Notes:

- **What seems most important to you?**
 - Pursue connecting with specific groups, particularly dairy farmers who might have greater need. Connecting with specific groups, Maybe connect via PDCs. Virginia Farm Bureau as an inroad with farmers? Need to find less digital ways to reach out to some (e.g. farmers).
 - Getting farms on board. Dairy farmers and others with high energy needs
 - Public awareness is a big thing. Lots don't know that solar is a viable option and can save them money. How did the tours work?
 - How can we better publicize events like tours, etc. to get greater participation? Maybe plan field trips through schools with parents joining them on those tours.
- **How would you modify it, or what other actions might be needed?**
 - Increase accessibility and costing models, as well as increasing awareness of financing vehicles
 - Talk to the practical implications and savings vs. investment that can be achieved through solar
 - How to help people, in general, understand that solar is more accessible to them and find out what the major obstacles are to them
- **Would you be willing to work on any items? If so, how?**
 - Ran out of time

Top ideas:

- Getting other industries, such as farmers and the dairy industry on board
- School field trips to local solar arrays for public visibility and education
- Focus on accessibility by talking about practical implications and savings vs investment to help people understand that solar is more accessible to them than they might realize.

Solar Workgroup Meeting: Breakout Group 4 Goal 4: Policy

Facilitator: Chelsea Barnes, Appalachian Voices

Participants: Hannah Coman, Brad Kreps, Vince Maiden, Gerry Scardo

Goal 4: Promote policy changes that will help grow the solar industry in Southwest Virginia.

Action Strategies/Policy Recommendations:

- A. Remove restrictions on net metering**, which has been instrumental in making solar financially viable for residential and commercial customers in many states.
- B. Expand community solar**, which is the development of solar energy projects for multiple customers.
- C. Expand access to Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs)** for net metering, which have the potential to make solar accessible to many more people, but Virginia utilities have pushed to limit the number of PPAs allowable in the state.
- D. Fund the Virginia Solar Energy Development and Energy Storage Authority**, which was enacted in 2015 by the General Assembly.
- E. Increase access to tax incentives at the state and local level** to provide investment-based incentives for solar in the form of loan assistance and tax deductions.
- F. Utilize pumped-storage hydroelectric facilities for increased solar in Southwest Virginia.**

Suggested Planning Team Updates to Goal and Action Items:

- **Add bullets on resilience, storage goals, brownfields-related policies, and brightfields.**
- Include language specific to multi-family housing
- Update D. Fund the Virginia Solar Energy Development and Energy Storage Authority
- Replace F. with “Encourage and investigate solar power storage technologies in Southwest Virginia.
- Facilitate regional collaboration in solar development initiatives.

Discussion Notes:

- Update Goal 4 language to include energy storage: “Goal 4: Promote policy changes that will help grow the solar industry [and energy storage industry] in Southwest Virginia.” There is also a need to consider whether energy storage is already part of the “solar industry” given the suggested addition to the goal language.
- For Action Strategy D, there is a need to do research on the status of this authority; need to broaden this to include the Southwest Virginia Energy Research and Development Authority (also needs funding) and the Clean Energy Advisory Board (also needs funding).
- Carrie Hearne suggested contacting Ken Jurman at DMME who staffs the Authority to learn about the status. Also, see here <https://www.vasolarandstorage.org/about> (site is still under development, but holds the Authority info, minutes, reports, etc.).
- See additions of Action Strategies G and H.
- Add: Innovative financing!

Refined Goal 4 and Action Strategies:

Goal 4: Promote policy changes that will help grow the solar industry [and energy storage industry] in Southwest Virginia.

Action Strategies/Policy Recommendations:

- A. Remove restrictions on net metering**, which has been instrumental in making solar financially viable for residential and commercial customers in many states.
- B. Expand community solar**, which is the development of solar energy projects for multiple customers.

C. Expand access to Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) for net metering, which have the potential to make solar accessible to many more people, but Virginia utilities have pushed to limit the number of PPAs allowable in the state.

D. Fund the Virginia Solar Energy Development and Energy Storage Authority, which was enacted in 2015 by the General Assembly. (Need to do research on status of this authority; need to broaden this to include the Southwest Virginia Energy Research and Development Authority (also needs funding) and the Clean Energy Advisory Board (also needs funding).) Legislation tied to funding may be hard to move though; maybe need to use future funding mechanism.

E. Increase access to tax incentives at the state and local level to provide investment-based incentives for solar in the form of loan assistance and tax deductions.

F. Utilize pumped-storage hydroelectric facilities for increased solar in Southwest Virginia.

G. [Consider adding financial support -- public/private funding opportunities.]

H. Incentivize projects on brownfields and continue to advance the Brightfields legislation. (engage Angie Jenkins early; engage with DMME; reach out to Terry Kilgore).

Add: Innovative financing!