

A RESOURCE RURAL CASE STUDY

Powering Our Communities: Saving Money and Energy in Rural Minnesota



Introduction

Across the country, rural people and organizations are bringing clean energy technologies to their communities in exciting and creative ways—conserving energy, saving money, and building resilience and self-sufficiency.

This case study spotlights two programs in rural Minnesota that have important learnings to share with the wider field, from funders and policymakers to practitioners and communities. While these programs—the **West Central Initiative Municipal Solar Cohort** and the **St. James Community Energy Navigator Project**—were designed to meet the needs of their specific times and places, the

learnings highlighted here are widely applicable beyond the region and into the future.

In these pages, rural development practitioners will find strategies to build effective partnerships and programs for community-driven energy projects. Funders and policymakers will find key considerations for designing effective rural-serving programs. Communities will see how other rural communities have saved energy and money. And contractors and energy businesses will learn how they can participate in innovative partnerships to access new markets and serve new clients.

EMERGING THEMES

Across the many conversations that led to this case study, several themes emerged with remarkable consistency:

- The importance of strong, trusting, respectful relationships as a foundation for a successful project
- The need to keep communities in the driver's seat throughout project design and implementation
- The power of a practical, informative approach to communication that respects the autonomy and intelligence of participants

Cover Photo: Solar installation in Ashby, Minnesota.

“What we're doing is energy democracy, literally giving the power back to the people.”



—Griffin Peck, West Central Initiative

CASE STUDY PROCESS

This case study was drafted by Resource Rural based on interviews with 15 program participants, staff members, and collaborating partners across both programs in late 2025. It was then refined and collaboratively developed in consultation with West Central Initiative (WCI) and Region Nine Development Commission (RNDC) in early 2026.

ABOUT RESOURCE RURAL

Resource Rural mobilizes resources to enable rural communities to unlock public and private investment to make a tangible difference across infrastructure, economic development, energy, climate, and workforce projects. Resource Rural supports work to build rural community capacity, diversify and strengthen rural economies, grow civic power, shift narratives, attract philanthropic investment, and document learning.

This work was made possible by a generous grant from BuildUS.



Photo: Jared Montagne of St. James Electric removing a gas line to install an all electric heat pump water heater.

West Central Initiative Municipal Solar Cohort



GOALS

- Increase awareness and knowledge of clean energy opportunities among rural community leaders
- Help communities save money and energy through rooftop solar

PARTNERS

- West Central Initiative
- Otter Tail Power
- Lakes Country Service Cooperative

IMPACT

Ten communities in the first cohort will save a total of \$1,487,724 over 30 years through rooftop solar projects.

West Central Initiative

West Central Initiative (WCI) is a community foundation and regional planning organization serving nine Minnesota counties and White Earth Nation. WCI's unique structure and broad mission—to improve west central Minnesota through funding, programs, and technical assistance—enable it to address community needs responsively with a variety of tools and approaches. Key areas of focus in recent years include rural democracy and belonging, climate resilience, economic development, early childhood education, transportation, and sustainable agriculture.

Motivation: Saving Money and Energy

Small cities and towns in rural Minnesota operate on very tight budgets. Energy costs for municipal buildings often account for a significant portion of these budgets. In 2023, WCI saw an opportunity to help municipalities reduce energy costs and emissions through rooftop solar on municipal buildings. While significant savings on these clean energy investments were possible through local utility rebates and federal tax credits, small municipalities did not have the awareness, staff capacity, expertise, or funds necessary to take advantage of these opportunities. In addition, the new and evolving nature of the technology and the polarized political climate contributed to misunderstandings and hesitance around clean energy projects among local leaders. WCI was ideally positioned to address these barriers and help communities access available incentives.

How It Came Together: Relationships, Partnerships, Peer Learning, and a Web of Support

With funding aimed at helping rural communities access resources, WCI hired new staff members with expertise in rural clean energy and technical assistance as well as experience working with small municipalities in the region. WCI already had strong relationships with municipal leaders through its rural democracy programs, which supported professional development and peer networking for a cohort of rural mayors.

Building on the success of the rural mayors' group, WCI invited local leaders to participate in a cohort focused on learning more about clean energy opportunities. At the same time, WCI staff brought

“ It seemed like such a good idea, so efficient and economical, why would we not do that? We're really excited about the potential energy savings. There's never enough money in the budget.



—Latham Hetland, Mayor of New York Mills, MN

“ Small projects can have a big impact in some of these rural communities. When you're 200 people, saving thousands a year is a big deal.



—Ben Schierer, West Central Initiative

“ People in our rural communities have knowledge about diesel engines and other forms of energy generation. So I'd say **'Think of this as a diesel generator with annual maintenance capped at \$800, and all the fuel is free.'** And they'd say 'Oh! It's a generator.' That really helped people switch how they thought about it.



—Griffin Peck, West Central Initiative

together a coalition of partner organizations to create a web of support that would allow small municipalities with very little staff or other capacity to easily install rooftop solar and reap the benefits.

Ten communities joined the first Municipal Solar Cohort in 2024, meeting monthly to learn about different aspects of rooftop solar on municipal buildings. Participants visited a solar site, spoke with representatives of the local electric utility, and learned more about solar energy and how it might benefit their communities.

For each participating community, WCI staff conducted a solar site analysis, which included a site visit and assessment of buildings, review of 12-24 months of electric utility bills, an energy analysis to estimate solar array size and outputs, a utility rate analysis, and a cash flow analysis demonstrating project payback and long-term savings. Each analysis was careful and conservative, accounting for potential impacts such as losses from snow and panel degradation over time, which are not always included in such calculations. This approach built trust with the community leaders, enabling them to feel confident about the realistic prospects of the projects.

WCI's financing and logistical support is structured to address the practical barriers faced by small communities, including extremely limited staff time (many municipalities have a single staff member who works only a small number of hours per week) and lack of ready cash to finance a project up front. To ease administrative burdens on municipalities, WCI staff help navigate paperwork, providing orientation and reminders to help keep things on track. Solar installers and a contracted tax firm provide additional paperwork support.

“ We liked the fact that there were many other cities doing it, and it wasn't all on us to do all the work and vetting. Cohort meetings were very beneficial because we all had similar questions. We don't have a lot of time, I'm a very part time mayor, so it was great to be guided through the process.



—Latham Hetland, Mayor of New York Mills, MN

“ We were careful to be realistic in our projections. We wanted to give the most accurate picture of what solar is going to look like so they could have confidence in voting on this with a degree of certainty about the amount of savings. We did conservative estimates. Communities appreciated that.



—Griffin Peck, West Central Initiative



Photo: Participants tour a solar site.

As the program developed, WCI staff realized there was a gap in the funding options for the projects: the projects were both too small to bond for and too short-term for bank loans. To address this barrier, WCI's revolving loan fund offers loans of up to \$150,000 with 0% interest and no origination fee to communities that are not able to finance their solar projects in other ways. Repayment consists of the utility rebate, the tax credit when it is received, and a simple repayment plan not to exceed 24 months. Grant funds are available to ensure payback times do not exceed 24 months, on a case-by-case basis.

To support project installation, WCI partnered with Lakes Country Service Cooperative, an organization authorized to perform cooperative purchasing on behalf of school districts and communities. Lakes Country managed a cooperative Request for Proposal (RFP) process on behalf of the first cohort of communities, enabling them to contract with vendors and purchase necessary equipment with minimal administrative burden. The cooperative RFP also bundled the projects together, making them more attractive to potential vendors.

Finally, flexible funding allowed WCI to respond nimbly to opportunities as the project unfolded. When RFP responses for the first cohort came in, WCI staff realized they could offer additional grants for battery backup systems that would build resilience for these essential public facilities. Within weeks, they were able to work with municipalities and vendors to add this crucial extra support for several communities, moving them closer to serving as resilience hubs for their rural regions.

“ We built in some backup redundancies: longer term loans with smaller repayments over time than we think they can do. If they think they can do it in three years, we'll make it five years with a smaller payment. It provides reassurance because this is new to a lot of people.



—Greg Wagner, West Central Initiative

“ The results are pretty clear: it's been a successful partnership, a good example of working with minimal restrictions. Federal, state, private utility, and local government—all of them played a role. It's a model of how that can work.



—Ben Schierer, West Central Initiative



Photo: Solar array on Pelican Rapids municipal liquor store.



MANY HANDS

West Central Initiative designed the program, convened partners and participants, supported the peer learning cohort, analyzed the municipalities’ solar potential, guided participants through paperwork, and provided financing.

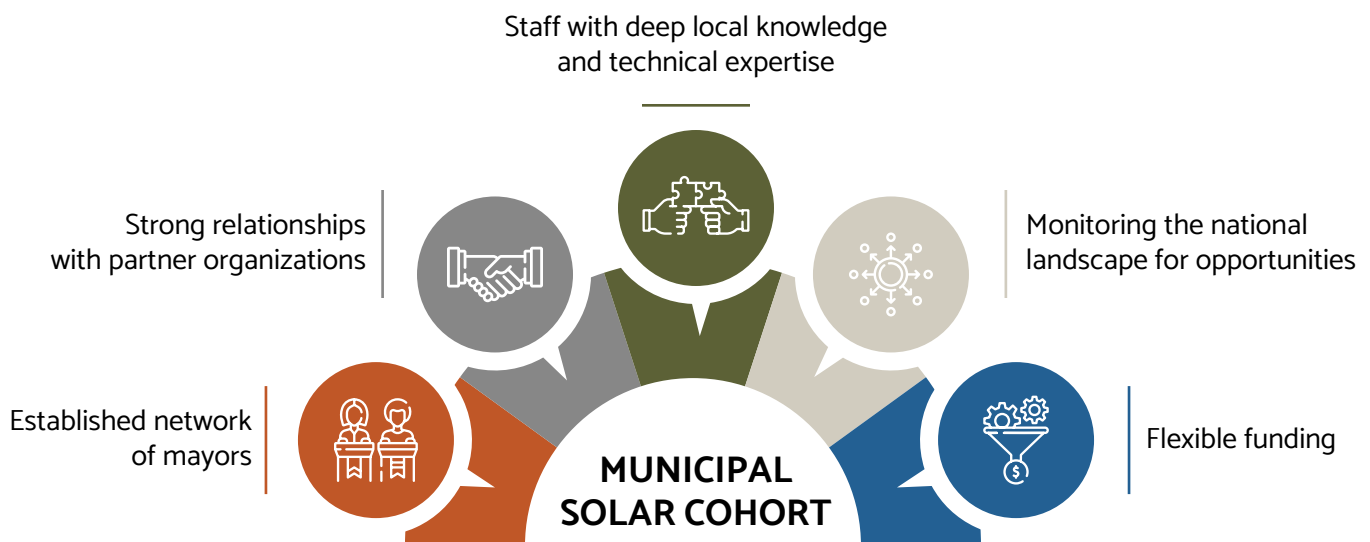
Lakes Country Service Cooperative managed a cooperative RFP process to procure solar installation services and equipment for the participating communities.

Otter Tail Power performed energy audits on municipal buildings and provided rebates to communities installing solar.

BUILDING ON GROUNDWORK



West Central Initiative’s ability to move quickly to implement the Municipal Solar Cohort was a result of years of groundwork—building trust with local municipalities, strong relationships with supporting organizations and the local electric utility, strategic staffing, and a long-term focus on identifying opportunities for local communities.





KEYS TO SUCCESS

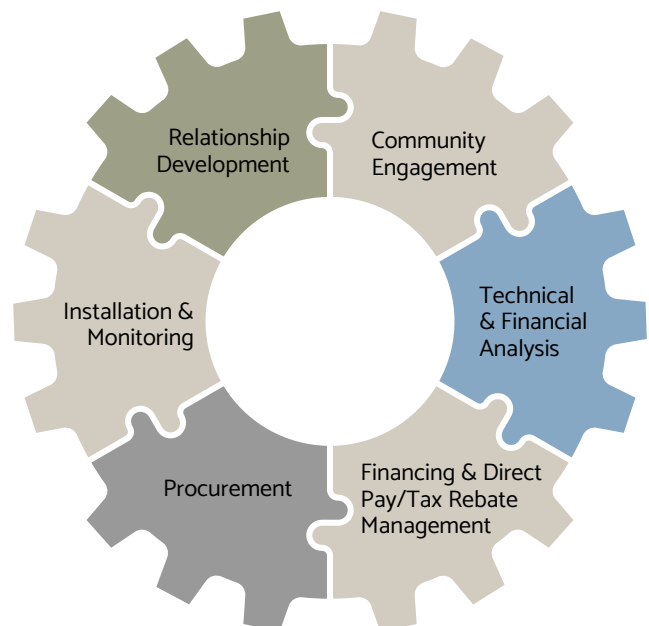
- **Relationships and trust:** WCI had built trust with local leaders through many years of consistent and responsive programming. These trusting relationships made it easier for local leaders to join the project, even if they had reservations or doubts about solar or clean energy work.
- **Clear, practical framing and communication:** WCI prioritized communicating clearly and in a way that focused on what matters to communities. Program staff respected participants' time and concerns and took a plain-spoken, no-hype approach to communicating about risks, benefits, and options for solar projects.
- **Cohort-based learning:** Working with a group allowed WCI to address common questions and misconceptions for all participants, saving time and effort. The group format helped build momentum among community leaders, and the presence of peer communities made participation less politically risky.
- **Balanced team, effective collaboration:** WCI paid careful attention to staffing this project. Team members had personal experience leading and working for small municipalities, expertise in the practical details of solar projects, and deep experience with peer learning and technical assistance. Partner organizations provided key support to the project, including Otter Tail Power and Lakes Country Service Cooperative.
- **Simple, streamlined process:** Throughout project design and implementation, WCI staff paid careful attention to making sure the process was accessible to communities and responsive to their needs. This required a consistent focus on identifying and addressing barriers for communities as they arose, not just in the initial project design.

“WCI played a really big role in bringing all the partners into the same group and coordinating the communication.”



—Brandon Johnson, Otter Tail Power

WCI's ELEMENTS OF SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES



St. James Community Energy Navigators



GOALS

- Increase awareness of clean energy and energy efficiency
- Improve safety and efficiency of local housing
- Help residents save energy and money

PARTNERS

- Convivencia Hispana
- Region Nine Development Commission (RNDC)
- Center for Energy and Environment Home Energy Squad

IMPACT

Provided comprehensive energy audits for 143 homes, and provided clean energy updates in 42.

Convivencia Hispana

Convivencia Hispana is a grassroots, volunteer-led organization working to inform and educate neighbors in the Hispanic community in Watonwan County and Southern Minnesota on issues and resources that impact family, economic, and social well-being.

Region Nine Development Commission

RNDC is a regional unit of government serving nine counties in southern Minnesota. RNDC's mission is to promote the development of the region through intergovernmental cooperation, community and human development, long-range planning, and technical assistance. This has included developing climate resilience plans for communities, writing grants for solar at wastewater treatment plants, and developing a regional food rescue plan, housing studies, and community economic development plans.

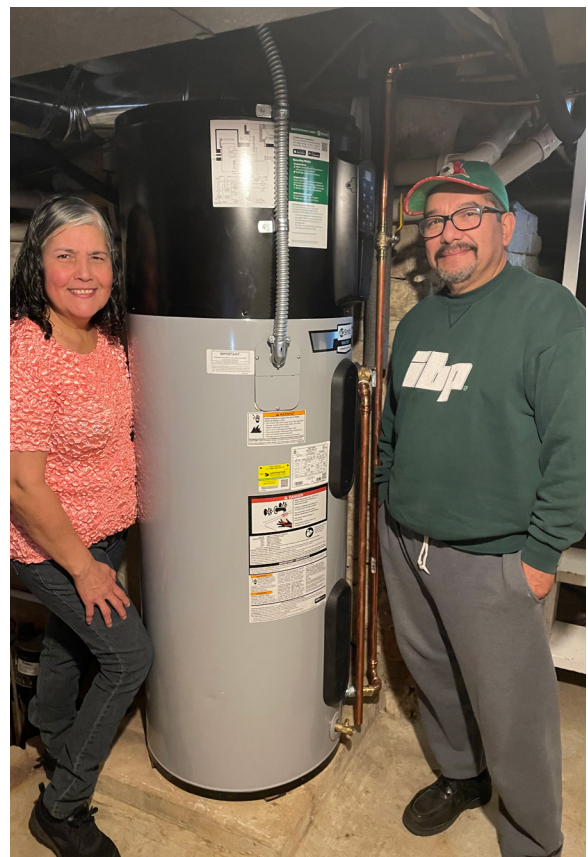


Photo: A new heat pump water heater installed in St. James.

Motivation: Efficiency, Comfort, and Safety

In the City of St. James in rural southern Minnesota, household energy systems are commonly out of date, inefficient, or even dangerous. While programs supporting energy upgrades like weatherization do exist, members of the Latino community (42% of the city's 4,793 residents) have historically not accessed them at high rates due to language, cultural, and logistical barriers. In 2022, community volunteers with Convivencia Hispana were learning about clean energy and wanted to bring this knowledge to their community. Through energy efficiency, the volunteers saw an opportunity to help their neighbors conserve energy, save money, and be safer and more comfortable at home.

“The problems are different in every house. There are issues where the furnace is old, it's poorly installed, there's a carbon monoxide leak, there's no insulation in the walls, there are cracks in the ceilings where energy escapes. The state of Minnesota is, as we say, “where the devil turns back,” because of the extreme weather. So, this is a necessity for living, not for enjoyment, but for survival. It's something very, very important.



—Everardo Vargas, Convivencia Hispana



Photo: Air source heat pump installed in St. James.



Photo: A family stands next to their newly installed furnace.

How It Came Together: Strong Partners and Community Engagement

Convivencia Hispana volunteers did not have grant writing or management experience, but they did have an established, trusting relationship with RNDC (known locally as Region Nine), an organization with established fundraising and project management infrastructure. Members reached out to their RNDC contact with their ideas and concerns, and RNDC was able to identify potential funding sources. The partners then worked together to design and secure funding for a project that would provide free energy audits and system upgrades to community members. RNDC served as fiscal, administrative, and technical lead—seeking funding, identifying the energy auditing company, and working with contractors—while Convivencia managed the project in the community.

The heart of the project involved training and supporting community members to become energy navigators, helping their neighbors, friends, and families learn about clean energy, energy efficiency, and opportunities to audit and upgrade their houses. Convivencia Hispana recruited navigators and RNDC supported their training, drawing on materials from Minnesota’s Clean Energy Resource Teams. Through word of mouth and an energized and enthusiastic group of seven energy navigators, **the project was able to register 170 households to participate in audits—nearly 10% of the city’s 1,833 occupied housing units.**

The results of the energy audits have been sobering—many houses need significant upgrades to be safe and efficient, and current funding is a drop in the bucket, given the scale of the need.

“It’s a good partnership because Region Nine respects our way to do stuff. We do things totally different than another organization does. We need to think of our population first. Get the trust, and trust takes time.



—Luisa Trapero, Convivencia Hispana

“There is so much power in having everyday people talk to their neighbors, coworkers, friends and family.



—Sabri Fair, RNDC



Photo: Insulation being installed to increase the energy efficiency of a home in St. James.

Grant funding supported upgrades to 42 houses, including insulation, air source heat pumps, heat pump water heaters, and efficient furnaces. To enable the upgrades, RNDC partnered with a local contractor who is enthusiastic about learning new technologies and building new relationships in the community.

The volunteers who started the project are gratified to see the audits and upgrades. They are also excited about the overall benefit to their community, which has built crucial knowledge, connections, capacity, and confidence through the process.

Moving forward, the partners hope to develop and fund a broader program to help households finance the energy upgrades identified in the audits, given the limitations of current grant support.



Photo: Map of completed home energy audits.

“ We’ve learned that there’s a lot of very old and dilapidated equipment out there that’s been band-aided together and made to operate in very inefficient and in some cases dangerous situations. They’re in grave need of upgrades from an efficiency and a safety standpoint. It’s good to know that when you leave a home, it’s a lot safer than it was when you came there.



—Mike Kulseth, St. James Electric

“ The results that excite us the most are seeing families happy with their new equipment.



—Everardo Vargas, Convivencia Hispana

“ I’m proud of empowering our navigators and our community. Our community is gaining a lot of knowledge through the audits and workshops.



—Luisa Trapero, Convivencia Hispana



MANY HANDS

Convivencia Hispana conceived of the project, reached out to RNDC, and designed and managed the project with support from RNDC.

RNDC supported project design, sought and managed funding for the project, trained energy navigators, identified and engaged with contractors, and provided implementation support.

Center for Energy and Environment's Home Energy Squad provided energy audits.

BUILDING ON GROUNDWORK



Convivencia Hispana and **RNDC** were able to develop and implement this project because they had put in time to build trusting relationships between their organizations and with their community.





KEYS TO SUCCESS

- **Equitable partnership:** The partnership between Convivencia Hispana and RNDC was well-balanced and respectful. RNDC's role as the "professional partner" was to enable and assist, while Convivencia Hispana, the community partner, took the lead. This structure differs from a more common model in which the professional partner leads and the community partner focuses on "outreach."
- **Intentional local capacity building:** The equitable partnership between the two organizations allowed Convivencia Hispana and its members to gain significant knowledge and capacity related to clean energy, energy efficiency, grant funding, and project management.
- **Grounding in community:** Employing community members as paid energy navigators enabled the project to quickly gain trust in a community that is often unsure or outright distrusting of outsiders. The knowledge that the navigators gained will also stay in and continue to benefit the community.
- **Local contractor partner:** St. James Electric understood both the local landscape and the new technologies involved. They were willing to work cooperatively on the project and learn new approaches as necessary, seeing an opportunity to grow their business while serving the community.

“Convivencia Hispana has a wonderful partnership with Region Nine. We aren't knowledgeable on finding resources. But if we have a plan to do, we ask them and they can research it. Now I think I have a little more of an idea about finding funds, thanks to them being there for us.



–Luisa Trapero, Convivencia Hispana

“The folks in Convivencia Hispana are everyday people who work full time jobs. They are not energy experts but community is their passion. Our job is to be a professional partner to enable the community. It's an equal power dynamic: they feel comfortable saying "No this isn't going to work, we want to do it this way." To partner with Convivencia Hispana in a trusting manner has been really good. I'm proud of our ability to put them in the driver's seat and carry out this project in a way that meets their community goals—for them to be the lead on the grant, rather than the outreach.



–Sabri Fair, RNDC

Learnings for the Field

COMMUNICATING IN A SENSITIVE ENVIRONMENT

Rural communities are often conservative—both “small c” and politically. Local leaders may prefer familiar approaches to new technologies, they may be hesitant to trust outsiders with an agenda, and they may be affected by the intense politicization of public conversation around clean energy. They also have close relationships with their neighbors and constituents and want to make sure they get things right.

The projects profiled here provide a clear model for building trust and engaging communities across backgrounds and perspectives. First, both projects were built on a foundation of strong relationships and trust. Project leaders and staff spoke participants’ language (both literally and figuratively) and communicated honestly and straightforwardly.

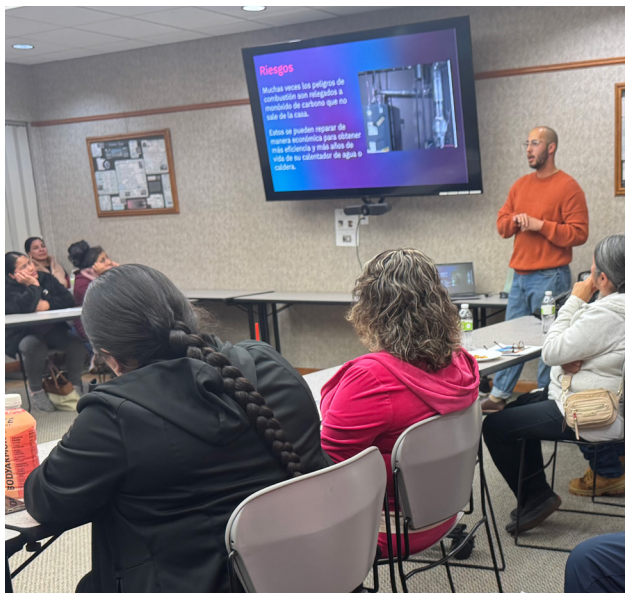


Photo: Community education event hosted by Convivencia Hispana and RNDC.

“ Know your audience, what matters to your communities. Find the shared value. Even if you don’t have all the same motivation, there is a great deal of shared value around wanting our communities to be healthy and resilient.



—Cedar Walters, West Central Initiative

“ Take the time to build trust and don’t over promise. That’s something that WCI did very well. They said we’re not trying to sell you something, we’re trying to tell you the reasons this project would be positive for your community.



—Jane Eastes, Lakes Country Service Cooperative

“ Many times, our community is very distrustful because they say nobody gives anything for free. Nobody gives you anything without wanting something in return. But over time, our work and the results are what open the door to earning the trust of the people.



—Julieta Ochoa, Convivencia Hispana

Both projects took an *informing* rather than a *selling* approach: presenting practical benefits aligned with community needs, and demonstrating openness, respect, humility, and a willingness to answer questions. Energy audits and solar site analyses were detailed, practical, conservative, and accessible, and staff members took the time necessary to make sure participants got all the information they needed to make good decisions.

Finally, peer learning was a key aspect of success for both projects. **Doing something new is always easier if your neighbors are doing it too.**

“ We have to understand the realities of where we live—in a “small c” conservative area. That requires thoughtful people, willing to build relationships. Some of these conversations can get to be political without needing to be.



—Ben Schierer, West Central Initiative

RURAL-ACCESSIBLE FUNDING

Rural municipalities and community organizations often have very limited staffing and administrative capacity (e.g., a director or mayor working less than half time with little additional support). Applying for and managing traditional reimbursement-based grant funding—even small grants—is out of reach for such entities, which worsens existing funding gaps between communities.

“ This is a very conservative environment, and climate used to have a stigma. There was stigma attached to even talking about climate. But we don’t have to be timid, we can be brave. The key ingredients to our success are exactly what Dorothy’s companions in the Wizard of Oz were looking for—you need a heart, a brain, and courage. You’ve got to be friends with people, have real relationships. You’ve got to be able to hold your ground, explain what’s going on, listen to questions, and answer them. You have to be able to do it in front. And it’s never sufficient to say “I have all the answers.” If you don’t do the heart and bravery piece, being the smartest kid on the block doesn’t cut it.



—Anna Wasescha, West Central Initiative

“ The policies that enabled these projects were really straightforward and simple. There were no 100-page grant applications, just tax rebates that communities could take advantage of. That’s one of the takeaways, a way that government can have efficient and effective impact. It’s all about access—having access to these opportunities in ways that are not overly burdensome. Government can be too burdensome—by the time you get that \$100k grant, how much time have you invested? How many mandates have you navigated? It’s just not worth it.



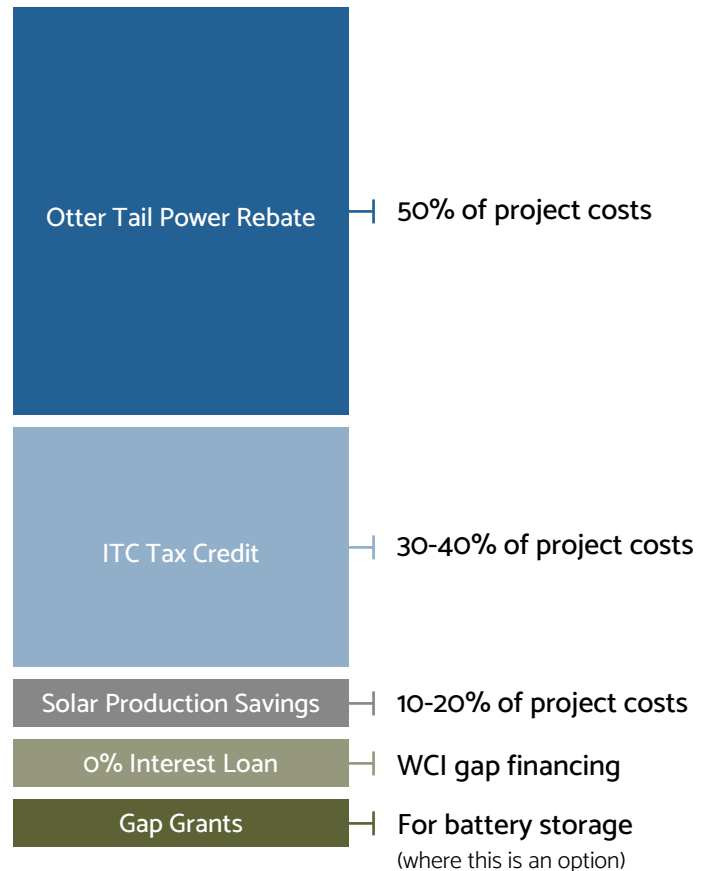
—Ben Schierer, West Central Initiative

Organizations like WCI and RNDC can step in to increase access as described in this case study—providing fiscal resources, technical assistance, and wraparound services. But this is at best a stopgap solution, with rural entities remaining at a significant disadvantage.

The best approach would be to create funding streams that are easy to access, consistent, and designed for rural communities in the first place. Structures like rebates and tax credits can be a good step in this direction, but only if upfront financing is made available and the administrative requirements are clear and not onerous. Even then, small municipalities and nonprofits will need assistance using such financing tools.

Flexible, trust-based funding is ideal for rural communities because it comes with minimal administrative burden and allows funded organizations to respond to community needs in real time. Without this type of funding, WCI would not have been able to move quickly in response to the opportunity to add battery backup systems to communities’ solar installations. Funders can approach this work by emulating the successful relationship between RNDC and Convivencia Hispana—asking what communities want to accomplish and providing support to enable them to meet their goals.

WCI MUNICIPAL SOLAR CAPITAL STACK



“Policymakers should know that many programs and opportunities are almost unimaginably far away and unreachable to people without capacity—not just limited capacity, but no capacity. You can dangle all these things, but without the capacity, they’re never going to be able to get it. We’re trying to fill that gap, but without us, it’s just going to be more alienating, more destructive to the body politic.”



—Anna Wasescha, West Central Initiative

Learnings for Organizations and Rural Practitioners

- Remember that strong, trusting relationships are the ground on which success is built
- Build a team with the expertise you need, balancing internal expertise and external partners and vendors
- Hire staff who can relate to your community
- Keep community needs and priorities at the center of project design
- Respect community members' time and energy
- Consider working in groups or cohorts to build momentum
- Take a practical, straightforward approach to communication that respects participants as equals—do not manipulate, “sell,” or talk down to people
- Stay true to your mission, stay curious, and learn with the people and organizations you serve



Photo: Solar installation in Ashby, Minnesota.

“ If you're looking to do this work, I'd say don't be prescriptive on the front end. Do your homework, build the relationships, and focus on the local needs and opportunities.



—Ben Schierer, West Central Initiative

“ Go slow because the relationships really matter. And don't be afraid to think big. If we had stuck with one community here and there, there wouldn't be much impact, but by getting everyone together, we really got some momentum.



—Cedar Walters, West Central Initiative

“ Find the right people for your team and project. Open communication with a variety of stakeholders—especially the supplier pool—is essential to developing a strong project. Leverage supplier knowledge, build a solid baseline understanding, and keep those lines of communication open as you draft so you're creating something vendors will be prepared and motivated to respond to.



—Joni Puffett, Lakes Country Service Cooperative

Learnings for Funders

- Find and fill gaps
- Leverage timely opportunities
- Trust communities and organizations close to the ground
 - » Enable the work communities prioritize
 - » Fund flexibly so organizations can be responsive
 - » Follow communities' lead to measure impact
- Invest in readiness
 - » Fund ongoing capacity, relationship-building, and infrastructure so communities can take advantage of opportunities as they come up

“Organizations all need resources to do things. When a funder says they want to paint every tree red, you want to chase the money. But to be authentic and grounded, you have to be real about it, resist the pressure to twist yourself into whatever pretzel is this week's funding feature. Know thyself and be true to thyself.



—Anna Wasescha, West Central Initiative



Photo: Solar installation in Comfrey, Minnesota.

Learnings for Policymakers

- Design programs to be accessible to rural
 - » Low administrative burden
 - » Possible at a small scale
 - » Workable at a distance from metro resources
 - » Minimal initial investment required (e.g., advanced rather than reimbursement-based funding)
- Invest in regional entities like WCI and RNDC so they are positioned to operationalize policies and programs on the ground
- Remember that small numbers can have a big impact in a rural community—measure and consider impact proportionally

“ For policymakers, having a longer horizon is really important. Rural electrification was a 20-year program. That’s a great example of being realistic about how long it takes to transform any landscape, and certainly a rural landscape.



—Anna Wasescha, West Central Initiative



Photo by Dennis Terner, Cokato, Minnesota.

Learnings for Communities and Grassroots Groups

- Understand your community's needs
- Learn from other communities and groups
- Draw on local organizations and programs for support
- Build relationships with local vendors and contractors
- Utility companies can be important resources

“ We've been working with the community for 10 years, so they already recognize us. They already trust us. We knock, and they open the door without any problem. I know that at the beginning, it's not so easy because we are a little distrustful as a community. But when the work starts to show results, it's also good to let people know, because that creates trust. A family that benefits tells another, and another, and the information spreads within the community. And that gives you confidence. It gives you credibility.



–Julieta Ochoa, Convivencia Hispana

“ A lot of people see an energy bill as something that's just there and they can't do anything about it. But utilities need to be looked at more as a resource—we can help people save money.



–Brandon Johnson, Otter Tail Power

“ It takes patience to do this kind of work. Always be true to yourself, be true to what you want to do. You can learn, upgrade, but don't change what your roots are.



–Luisa Trapero, Convivencia Hispana



Photo: St. James Community Energy Navigators.

Learnings for Contractors and Energy Businesses

- Take opportunities to learn new technologies
- Consider partnering with nonprofits to participate in projects to access new markets
- Develop a locally-rooted workforce through training and apprenticeship



Photo: 96% efficient furnace installed in St. James.

“Contractors are very busy. We want to make it easier for them so they see it as a guaranteed business opportunity.”



—Sabri Fair, RNDC

“We recently started doing heat pump water heaters. It’s shocking to me that there aren’t many, many more being installed. It seems like a no-brainer after putting them in and seeing how good they operate and the simplicity of it.”

The project has opened up another market to us, people that we didn’t think would be our customers. Now there’s a route for us to connect with them and they see us as their contractor and call us for other things.

A lot of contractors didn’t want to dabble in high efficiency heating and cooling because it was something new that they didn’t know anything about. But it’s actually simpler and easier to work with than the old versions. Once you start doing it, you get a comfort level and then there’s no fear anymore. To me, the future of heating and cooling is heat pumps. I mean, we’re never going to say, “well, we need to go back to those energy hogs.”



—Mike Kulseth, St. James Electric