

TIPS FOR ADVANCING COMMUNITY SOLAR

ONE TOWN'S EXPERIENCE AND ADVICE

May 2014

CONTEXT:

Over the past few years, the Waterbury Local Energy Action Partnership (Waterbury LEAP) has taken the lead in inspiring far more residents in Waterbury and Duxbury to go solar. They undertook a solar challenge called the “Waterbury/Duxbury Solar Year” to help individual homeowners to invest in solar. Their story is a model for others to follow. One of their intrepid local leaders — [Jamison Ervin](#) — outlined their solar goals and the keys to their success, below...



The Solar Challenge:

- The first Waterbury/Duxbury Solar Year: (2012-2013)
 - Launched in April 2012 at the Waterbury LEAP Fair, the aim was to double community solar in one year.
 - LEAP created a photo display, held a summer solar celebration, wrote articles, held a solar for businesses meeting, held open houses, began discussions with select boards and school boards.
 - Within 11 months, they had doubled the total installed solar in our two towns!
- The second Waterbury/Duxbury Solar Year (2013-2014)
 - Emboldened by success, LEAP launched the second Waterbury/Duxbury Solar Year in April 2013, and they are on track to meet the goal.
 - There have been many new residential installations throughout the year, the vast majority of which are modest, middle-income homes; many are low-income.
 - In December 2013, they celebrated with a ribbon cutting of the state's largest solar school array in Duxbury.
 - They flipped the switch on a new 32-kilowatt array on our firehouse.
 - There are plans for a 500-kilowatt municipal array in Waterbury Center, a 150-kilowatt community array, and several other large projects for 2014.
 - LEAP (Waterbury/Duxbury) is track to quadruple the 2012 installed solar capacity in mid-2014.

The numbers:

- In 2012 the two towns had 375 kilowatts of installed community solar capacity; in 2013 they had 750 kilowatts, and in 2014, they will have 1500 kilowatts of local,

renewable community solar, equivalent of more than one full solar panel for every single one of the 6700 men, women and children who live in the two towns.

- To put these numbers in perspective, Duxbury has the highest per capita solar in Vermont, and Waterbury has the third. The two towns have 3.5 times the state's average, in a state that already ranks 9th in the nation. If the two towns were compared with other states, they would be leading Arizona by more than 50 percent, and leading the nation by a margin of more than 12 to one. In some parts of North Duxbury, that figure is closer to 25 times the national average.

SOME TIPS FOR UNDERTAKING A RESIDENTIAL SOLAR CHALLENGE OR CAMPAIGN:

1. **Name the initiative and call it something.** LEAP called theirs the "Waterbury/Duxbury Solar Year," but it could have been anything along those lines. Having a name for it meant they could use it and design a logo (which they did, including a brochure). Having a name means it's easier to talk about.
2. **Get select board buy-in as early as possible.** LEAP approached both the Waterbury and Duxbury selectboard as one of the first things they did. (Here is the letter they used to solicit interest and explain the challenge, as well as the resolution that resulted.) Once they had this commitment, they could refer to it at public meetings ("because of the select board's commitment, we investigated a range of options..." etc.). The selectboard's statement of support; helped create a cascade of yes'. They understood that helping local residents go solar was good for jobs, a good economic investment for residents (saving the average homeowner about \$12,000 over 25 years) good for the town and just a good thing to do. LEAP also worked to cultivate champions on the select board before the vote. They identified two select board leaders to work closely with before the vote, and they become leaders on it.
3. **Make the initiative visible.** LEAP did this through radio ads, a display downtown, a banner, a table at the farmer's market (just twice, but that had good exposure). Almost everyone in town knows about Waterbury LEAP.
4. **Hit the print media.** LEAP paid someone to write half a dozen articles on solar throughout the year (every 6-8 weeks). Energy committee member Jamison Ervin also wrote a few articles in addition. Having articles exploring different beneficial aspects of solar (the long-term money savings, the security, etc.) helped to make it part of news discourse. These articles were printed in the *Waterbury Record*, the free local rag that EVERYONE reads. So they had very good distribution.
5. **Use social media.** LEAP didn't do this as well as they could have, but the digital networks in neighborhoods are very dense and extensive now. They used facebook and Front Porch Forum as our two main vehicles. These tools have very good reach if used well...
6. **Pat yourself on the back in public.** It doesn't hurt to let reporters know that Waterbury LEAP did this and that...it helps to build momentum and gain recognition. So wherever they could, they would explain our successes as part of the storyline.

7. **Help people envision change by showing the diverse face of solar and.** Helping people catch a glimpse of what the future looks like is empowering. That's why it's so important to make the abstract, tangible. This is one of the most effective things to do to make a compelling, clear case. LEAP leaders took photos of every single solar installation in both their towns. This allowed them to have a visual display that showed the wide diversity of homes. They used this at almost all town meetings, so people could see what solar looked like. It allowed everyone to believe that solar was something for people like them, and it helped normalize the concept. People would see their home somewhere in all the photos...
8. **Reassure people that this is normal.** Showing pictures of what others are doing by going solar is key and connecting them to others who have — their friends or neighbors for example — is key. This helps people feel like it's a normal step, and they are not too out there.
9. **Make it fun!** LEAP had a mid-summer solar fest, where they had free pizza, free ice cream, free local music and invited the public, and seven local installers. It was fun, and about 15 families signed up that evening for solar.
10. **Bring in the big guns.** It doesn't hurt to have a press release with Governor Shumlin every now and then. He was very accommodating, and it was good to have his name associated with the efforts. Great PR.
11. **Make it personal.** LEAP had a few home parties, where people came to their neighbor's home to see solar. Many people are intimidated by the mechanics of solar, and having a friend or neighbor walk through how it works, how much it costs, what the benefits are, etc. really helps. It's astonishing how many people have no clue how solar works ("Do I need batteries?" "How does GMP keep track of my electricity?"). This helps demystify the process and make it accessible.
12. **Play the matchmaker.** Part of the job of effective town energy committees is simply making connections. In the solar challenge, it was between the installers and the community.
13. **Make the numbers clear and tangible.** Homeowners all want to know the numbers. How much will this cost and how much will this save? But that answer is different for all people. The key role for town energy committees is to unpack the complexity, and show people different finance models and options, and then put that together into different scenarios (e.g., if you buy a 6 kw system at x/installed watt you will save Y over 25 years).
14. **Get the numbers for boasting rights.** LEAP leaders spent about a day doing the research behind the statement "Duxbury is #1 in the state in per capita solar." While they admit their numbers might not be perfect, they believe they are pretty accurate. Because they had data on every household and business and school and muni building, they feel able to make their claims in confidence. Few other towns have the data, therefore they can't really rebut your argument. It's very powerful to say "we have more than one panel for every single person in our two towns," and "on a per capita basis, we're leading Arizona by a 50% margin in installed solar." Starting points: Vermont Energy Atlas, as well as the state Certificate of Public Good list. This allowed them to calculate differences between Vermont towns, and the photo display gave them tangible evidence too.

OTHER CRUCIAL KEYS TO SUCCESS...

1. **Have a strong town energy committee and committee structure.** Clear internal leadership on your town energy committee is key. Not everyone can (or should) do everything. Identifying particular people to lead on a project — channeling their passion and making them champions — is a great way to harness limited people power and build off of people's strengths.
2. **Raise money to support your efforts.** To undertake big projects like a solar challenge, securing funds that your committee can spend to enhance your campaign — banners, brochures, photos, food — is key. To the best of your ability, ensuring funds are available to spend in a discretionary way so that spending is adaptive to the needs and opportunities at hand is also important. The New England Grassroots Environment Fund has seed grants for town energy committees or communities pursuing efforts like this. Find more information at: <http://grassrootsfund.org/>. Or, reach out to local businesses as partners and potential supporters.
3. **Lift all boats!** There are a lot of solar installers in Vermont. Highlighting the choices people have for potential partners in their project is important. For a solar campaign, create a list of all installers available to do business in your area and make it accessible to all; posting it on your web site or printing and bringing it to local events.
4. **Showcase other solar options.** Most Vermonters don't have a viable site for solar on their roof or land, and many people rent. Showcasing how solar can be made available to all local residents — through a community solar model — is also important. Be sure to identify and point people to resources they can turn to if solar is a stretch on their home or business. For community solar options, visit www.vecan.net/communitysolar.

Many thanks to Jamison Ervin for sharing these tips. Jamison lives in Duxbury, serves on the board of Waterbury LEAP, Vermont's only independent town energy committee; has worked for 23 years in international environmental policy, focusing on land-use planning, climate resilience and biodiversity finance; has served for more than 20 years on local Vermont planning boards, land trusts and conservation commissions. She holds a Ph.D. from UVM in land-use planning in Vermont, and can be reached at jervin@sover.net or 802-244.5875.