

The Resilient Reader

Resilient Region Stories



Energy

October 2015



RREAL- Creating Community Solar Gardens

WHO: Champions of the Energy theme are:
Keith Olander (Dean of Ag)-Central Lakes College
Jason Edens (President)-RREAL
Molly Zins (Executive Director)-U of M Sustainable Development Partnership
Sarah Hayden (Coordinator)-CERTs

There have been many partners engaged in the Community Solar Garden project, most of which are tied in through the Resilient Region Plan. This project aligns with the Resilient Region plan goals to improve energy efficiency and adoption of affordable clean energy.

WHAT: The Energy Champions have been focused on establishing a community solar garden in the region with a particular interest on Community Solar for Community Action agencies who serve low income residents. A “conventional” Community Solar Garden allows rate payers of a utility to “subscribe” to a solar installation that is centrally located without having to install the system on their home. The credits from the production of their subscription shows up on their utility bill. For example, if someone rents, they would be unable to put solar panels on the roof. However, anyone can subscribe to this program and still reap the benefits of solar. The conventional community solar garden model is being promulgated and deployed statewide, but the Community Solar for Community Action project is a unique “twist” on the model that is specific to the Resilient Region which makes the model appropriate for low-income energy assistance applications.



WHY: The basic premise is rather than simply paying a low-income family's energy bills through energy assistance, this program can provide long-term subscriptions to low-income households in lieu of energy assistance to provide a long-term, clean and domestic solution to fuel poverty. The energy assistance payments would be used to purchase the subscription rather than a one year temporary fix.

The project is important because it represents a transformative model that can reform the federal energy assistance program and create a nationally relevant model that can easily be replicated nationwide. Energy assistance is delivered in all 50 states, and this model is relevant throughout the U.S.

Building a community solar garden is important for the region as it aligns with several theme areas including Housing, Economic Engines, and Changing Populations, which increases the impact area for this work.

WHERE: The site is to be determined. The precise location has not yet been determined due to additional hurdles that are more challenging to overcome.


WHEN: The first Community Solar array for Community Action agencies in will begin in 2016.

HOW: Numerous relationships have developed with power companies, non-profit entities, RREAL, R5DC and private consulting companies such as Creative Energy Services, and the UofM Clean Energy Resource Team.

Rural Renewable Energy Alliance (RREAL) has been a major partner for the community solar garden project. RREAL has been working with a community action agency to develop the solar garden, in partnership with Minnesota Power to launch and build out the solar garden.

Clean Energy Resource Teams and a private consulting company; Creative Energy Services applied for and received support from the University of Minnesota RSDP on adding value to the effort of RREAL.

Links for Energy

RREAL (Rural Renewable Energy Alliance) www.rreal.org 
University of Minnesota Extension www.extension.umn.edu 