CLCPA Draft Scoping Plan Public Comment

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Chapter 13, section E4, “Support Clean Energy Siting and Community Acceptance” outlines the state’s needs and wants for community engagement, education, and public outreach for proposed renewable energy projects. United Solar Energy Supporters (USES) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, who’s mission is to educate the public about the solar energy to foster understanding and support for large scale solar projects. USES has a public outreach manual that outlines ways for both grassroots organizers AND the renewable energy developer to educate the public most directly impacted by proposed renewable energy projects. The USES Grassroots Model by Trieste™ is a compilation of proven on-the-ground community organizing components used for over 20 years at Renewable Energy projects in the northeast. It is USES’s recommendation that New York State considers utilizing this time-tested resource in the CLCPA Scoping Plan as its approach to foster meaningful and timely community engagement.

As states increase the demand for renewable energy to replace fossil fuels, it is important that NYSERDA recognizes the benefit, and often the necessity of educating the public using grassroots organizing. It is equally important to encourage developers to communicate with community residents as early as possible during the siting of renewable energy projects. Marion Trieste, the author of the manual, worked with renewable energy developers for over 20 years throughout NYS and developed a keen understanding of ways to help developers communicate to the public. Marion gifted the manual to USES as an important resource for anyone who’s interested in ways to educate the public about utility-scale renewable energy projects. This manual can serve not only as a road map for developers who do not have experience with community-focused communication, but it is also a standard to hold developers accountable.

The manual has two sections. One section outlines the importance of grassroots organizing and ways to encourage people to learn about the proposed project and how solar energy works. It also outlines ways people can be a part of the solar energy projects being offered by attending town board meetings, write letters to the editor, sponsor educational forums and events, and promote the environmental and economic benefits of Renewable Energy in the local media. The key objective is to form an independent community group equipped with the tools and confidence to support proposed projects independent of a developer. An independent community group provides a platform that empowers trusted supporters of renewable energy projects to speak and represent the majority of community residents. Community groups typically help debunk misinformation, educate their neighbors and municipal leaders about the facts and the important community-specific economic benefits they hope will be offered by a developer.

There is also a section for the developers that outlines ways to support a grassroots organizer that can assist with forming an independent group. Successful community engagement requires strong dedication to the Model’s public outreach approach from the developer. The Model provides strategies to gain the host community’s trust and confidence for the project, as well as examples of how to best maintain communication early and often with the host community.

Components in the Model include: (For the Developer and the Organizer)

1. Audit Phase/Community Profile
   1. Assess the community in the area of the proposed solar projects and get a sense of what is happening on the ground.
2. How to Create & Build a Community Group
3. How to Develop a Strategic Plan to Build Public Trust
4. How to Educate and Train Supporters: arming members with facts
5. How to Organize Community Forums
6. How to Work with the media
7. How to Educate Public Opinion Leaders

Also included with the model is the Outreach Toolkit, which is full of real examples of outreach materials that have been used in tandem with the Model. The types of materials include petitions, statements of support, post cards, flyers and more. It also contains “how to” guides to writing press releases and media advisories. These tools are compiled for ease of grassroots organizers to take and use freely.

USES encourages developers to invest in this public outreach approach. Gaining public support for the many solar projects being proposed is critical to accomplishing the state goals set in the CLCPA.

In the draft CLCPA Scoping Plan, it is clear that NYSERDA understands the need for community engagement, public outreach, and education to gain acceptance for renewable energy projects. This resource was gifted to USES and is readily available for the guidance for grassroots organizing that the state needs.

The USES Grassroots Model by Trieste™ may be obtained by visiting: <https://usesusa.org/education/uses-models-by-trieste/>, filling out the request form and paying a licensing fee.