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Community Pathways and Recommendations for 100% Renewable Energy Commitments

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The following is an excerpt from a University of Michigan School for the Environment and Sustainability master's project, Investigating City Commitments to 100% Renewable Energy: Local Transitions and Energy Democracy, advised by Dr. Tony Reames.

UNDERSTANDING PATHWAYS TO 100% RENEWABLE ENERGY

In partnership with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance and the Sierra Club, the University of Michigan research team conducted a national survey to assess trends across city commitments to reach 100% renewable energy. Survey questionnaires were sent to 941 contacts—569 city officials and 372 community leaders. The response rate was roughly 11.5%, with 108 surveys completed. Key findings are described below:

- **Top drivers for commitment:** climate change concerns; care for the local environment; potential for financial savings
- **Top barriers to progress:** lack of funding; lack of support from the utility; lack of expertise
- **Most desired data resources:** peer network of municipal sustainability staff; online database(s) of city renewable energy practices; metrics to evaluate renewable energy initiatives
- **Top sources of funding for programs:** local taxes and fees; state and federal funding
- **Top methods for engaging the community on energy policy:** meeting with representatives from the community; public hearings; workshops; social media; lobbying and legislation; engaging in regulatory proceedings and other administrative actions
- **Top city building initiatives:** LED lighting; green building certification; public electric vehicle charging stations; on-site renewables
- **Most common ways to reduce energy burden:** partnering with representative and community-based groups from low-income communities; providing community education and workshops
- **Most common efficiency programs:** energy auditing; weatherization

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The Clean Energy in Michigan series provides case studies and fact sheets answering common questions about clean energy projects in Michigan.

Find this document and more about the project online at graham.umich.edu/climate-energy/energy-futures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the survey and additional interviews, the research team identified several common obstacles cities face while transitioning to 100% renewable energy. These include a lack of expertise and resources, difficulty siting renewable energy projects, limited communication between stakeholder groups, and uncertainties surrounding the disproportionate energy burden on low-income community members. The following recommendations were developed for use by local officials and advocates to address these barriers.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CITIES

1. Build partnerships, coalitions, and relationships externally and within the city to work together, partner on projects, and share resources, stories, and knowledge.
2. Ensure the energy burden on residents is distributed equitably. Address inequities by engaging marginalized communities and investing in efficiency and clean energy programs directed towards these communities.
3. Engage with other cities that have similar commitments to build a network of peers for sharing best practices, data, and metrics.
4. Collaborate with community-based organizations and national non-profits that can provide additional perspectives and resources to help with the planning and decision-making processes.
5. Assess the use and allocation of local taxes and fees from the city and supplement with state, federal, and fundraising opportunities (e.g. grants) in order to procure funding to implement programs and technologies.
6. Advocate for renewable energy policies and funding mechanisms at the state and federal level.
7. Empower citizens to have voices within the energy system through education and awareness campaigns, engagement in energy policy and regulation issues, and support of community-based organizations.
8. Hire dedicated staff and foster connections with other cities, particularly among the dedicated staff, to maximize expertise in the transition of the commitment.
9. Designate a team or person to champion the the renewable energy commitment and maintain communication within the local government, ensuring that all departments are on the same page.
10. Develop an interim goal to help motivate staffers towards the transition to 100% renewable energy.
11. Partner with neighboring cities on energy projects, whether they have made the commitment or not. Cities and residents tend to support renewable energy initiatives and may be willing to work with you.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CITIES CONTEMPLATING A 100% RENEWABLE COMMITMENT

1. Increase engagement within the city to mobilize the public to advocate for change.
2. Track energy usage in municipal buildings and build a greenhouse gas inventory to give your city a rough idea of where to begin before making the commitment.
3. Communicate with your state's energy office to see what resources are available to help ease the planning process (EGLE in Michigan).
4. Formalize the commitment even if there is not a fully-developed plan in place—the commitment will help inform the policies and choices that are made within the community going forward.

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