

Community Engagement at Great River Energy



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Humphrey School Capstone Report

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Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy
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Spring 2025

In Partnership with Great River Energy



HUMPHREY SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



Subject Keywords: Community engagement, clean energy, energy cooperative, communication.

Abstract:

This capstone project, conducted in partnership with Great River Energy, examines strategies to enhance community engagement, especially around clean energy initiatives, internal coordination, and stakeholder involvement. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that included interviews with GRE staff and stakeholders, observations, and focus groups, our research identified key barriers such as low participation, inconsistent communication, and the challenge of sustaining long-term relationships, particularly with students. Our findings emphasize the importance of meeting communities where they are through accessible education and early involvement, reducing awareness and logistical barriers, and supporting cultural and social inclusivity through targeted outreach. Our report also highlights the need for consistency in project operations, including uniform visuals, cross-divisional communication, and consistent project communication plans, to improve transparency and information sharing. Recommendations include addressing participation barriers through early engagement and tailored messaging, providing mentorship to students, and forming partnerships with high school organizations such as FFA chapters to support professional and workforce development. Overall, this project advocates for a consistent and strategic approach to community engagement that encourages long-term trust, boosts community participation, and aligns internal practices with community needs, supporting the transition of GRE's members to clean energy.

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Executive Summary

This capstone project examines how Great River Energy can enhance its approach to community engagement, with a particular focus on supporting clean energy initiatives. The goal of the paper is to identify actionable strategies that enhance meaningful, long-term connections with community members while improving internal consistency across outreach efforts.

To develop recommendations, the capstone team employed a mixed-methods approach, including semi-structured interviews with staff and external stakeholders, non-participant observation, and one focus group. These qualitative methods enabled the team to gather in-depth insights into current practices and discover areas for improvement. Key findings revealed that barriers prevent effective community engagement and contribute to low participation. The analysis also suggested that exploring new ways to support and sustain youth involvement offers benefits for the community and the cooperative. Additionally, project operations and communication inconsistencies highlight the need for fidelity to best practices and consistency in sharing information.

Based on these findings, the team offers the following recommendations:

- **To increase value and participation in community engagement**, it is essential to meet communities where they are, both physically and culturally. This can involve addressing participation barriers, including awareness, logistics, cultural and social norms, and individual motivation. By reducing barriers and offering accessible educational opportunities, greater involvement can be fostered, leading to increased attendance at open houses.
- **Develop and maintain relationships with young people** to help with community-building and workforce development efforts. Specific recommendations include engaging employees in internal workshops, using marketing tools for ongoing outreach to schools, creating a student mentorship program, and building partnerships with high school organizations.
- **Create consistency within project operations** by adopting uniform project management practices, consistently using materials across initiatives, and implementing clear and frequent communication strategies.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the staff from Great River Energy for their willingness to participate in this project. Their input was instrumental in shaping our recommendations and enhancing our overall understanding of cooperative engagement. An additional thank you to Jamie Stallman and Jeff Haase for coordinating logistics and providing valuable feedback throughout the project. We are also grateful to GRE's Community Benefit Plan Stakeholder Group for welcoming us as observers at their meetings over the past few months.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude for Matt Grimley's guidance and shared knowledge, which formed the basis of our research methodology for this project.

Introduction

This capstone project, developed in collaboration with Great River Energy (GRE), focuses on identifying opportunities to enhance the organization's approach to community engagement within the context of its ongoing clean energy initiatives. GRE is a Minnesota-based generation and transmission (G&T) electric cooperative based in Minnesota, owned by 26 distribution cooperative member owners, serving 1.7 million people.

As the cooperative continues to develop a variety of energy projects, including transmission infrastructure, wind development, and distributed solar, it recognizes that community engagement and stakeholder involvement can vary significantly depending on the region and the type of project. This understanding is fundamental as the cooperative prepares to expand its clean energy portfolio. GRE “will be involved...in the Tranche 2.1 portfolio, including two... transmission lines in northern Minnesota and... a new...[line] that will start in South Dakota, traverse across southern Minnesota and into Wisconsin and Iowa.”¹ Additionally, as part of the United States Department of Agriculture’s Empowering Rural America (New ERA) program award, GRE proposes multiple distributed solar projects across its service territory.² These projects differ not only in scale and location but also in the types of stakeholders involved. Stakeholders may include landowners, local officials, community organizations, and residents, each of whom brings their own perspectives, concerns, and expectations.

Guided by cooperative values and GRE’s commitment to the communities it serves, the project aims to offer practical recommendations for strengthening internal coordination and external engagement strategies. Recognizing the central role that communities play in the success of these efforts, GRE is interested in identifying tools, strategies, and internal practices that support a more consistent and effective approach to engaging stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle.

To make recommendations, the capstone team performed a variety of research strategies, including conducting semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and one focus group. This analysis is based on two guiding research questions: (1) What

¹ Great River Energy. (2024, December 12). MISO approves historic portfolio of high-voltage electric transmission lines. Great River Energy. <https://greatriverenergy.com/company-news/miso-approves-historic-portfolio-of-high-voltage-electric-transmission-lines/>

² Great River Energy Staff

is Great River Energy currently doing to maintain engagement with communities within its service area?³

Methodology

Scope

Our research focused on internal and external interviews, one focus group, and non-participant observation. The interviewing process informed a majority of the research and directly informed our recommendations.

Interviews

Through eight interviews, we spoke with nine internal staff members working in transmission, IT, human resources (HR), media relations, and communications. Our team put together a semi-structured interview protocol, which consisted of a list of open-ended questions.⁴ These questions explored stakeholder involvement across four key stages of the project lifecycle: conceptualization/planning, implementation, evaluation, and modifications.⁵ This protocol was primarily used in interviews with project-specific staff from the transmission and IT/project management teams. In contrast, the roles of HR, media relations, and communications staff differ, as they are not integrated into project work in the same way. As a result, interviews with these individuals focused more broadly on their current approaches to community engagement, the types of feedback they receive, and opportunities to improve engagement strategies. GRE staff selected and directly connected us with internal interviewees. Based on these interviews, we developed four visuals, each organized by role type, illustrating the key stages and highlighting any changes or improvements staff would like to see. The complete set of tables is available in Appendix B.

Apart from conversations with GRE, we conducted semi-structured interviews with three organizations involved in their Community Benefit Plan Stakeholder Group. Each interview followed a consistent format, focusing on the organization's community

³ The questions for this project originally focused on GRE's New ERA grant proposal however due to uncertainty around that funding, we shifted our scope to focus more broadly on the cooperative's community engagement efforts.

⁴ See Appendix A for the list of project team interview questions.

⁵ The questions for this project were informed by the Teleological Process Theory (Van de Ven & Sun, 2011). This theory views development as a repetitive sequence of goal formulation, implementation, evaluation, and modification of an envisioned end state, shaped by what is learned or intended by the people involved.

engagement efforts, their best practices, and what they hope to see from GRE, both with ongoing clean energy projects and beyond. We collaborated with GRE to identify stakeholders to interview from the larger group.

Focus Group

Following up on the interviews with GRE Staff, we engaged in a focus group consisting of eight GRE staff who also participated in the interview process. The purpose was to identify any gaps between the interview and focus group responses, encourage collaboration across divisions, and gain a better understanding of how these individuals interact or do not interact with one another. To begin the session, we provided a few example ideas from the tables in Appendix B, which had been developed based on their interview responses. Staff were then given time to reflect and write down additional or missing ideas, working individually and in small groups using colored sticky notes. After this activity, we gave them a copy of the completed tables to review. We then asked participants to share any surprises, challenges, or questions that emerged during the activity. In a full group discussion, we used prompting questions to help generate new ideas that could be used to address findings directly connected to both staff and stakeholder interviews. The questions explored what effective community engagement looks like, ways to increase community participation, and strategies to involve students in the team's work.

Non-Participant Observation

As a team, we collected primary data without directly engaging during meetings with the participants of GRE's Community Benefit Plan Stakeholder Group. We maintained a passive role, focusing on observing and taking notes as conversations unfolded organically. This method allowed us to gather insights while minimizing our influence on the setting. The stakeholders represented include those from the labor, workforce, economic development, and agriculture sectors. However, not all relevant stakeholders were present at every meeting. We attended three bi-weekly meetings, with the first virtual meeting held on February 28, 2025, and the last one on April 11, 2025.

Findings

1. *Participants identified too many barriers that prevent effective community engagement.*

Interviews were conducted with nine internal staff GRE members to gain a better understanding of the current engagement practices that occur throughout project planning, implementation, and completion. All GRE interviewees emphasized the importance of ensuring that projects align with the needs of cooperative member owners. The interviewees also expressed the importance of sharing project details as soon as possible with landowners, Tribes, and government agencies, including the Minnesota Public Utility Commission (PUC) and the Minnesota Department of Commerce. GRE staff mentioned that letting the PUC and the Department of Commerce know which projects GRE is pursuing in the next year helps ensure that there are no surprises for these entities.⁶ GRE also uses a third-party consultant to identify key stakeholders in project areas. This approach helps ensure that no community groups are overlooked during the engagement process, especially when developing large transmission projects that extend for hundreds of miles. Finding the right time to begin engagement allows for meaningful, two-way communication between project staff and communities. This engagement period should provide enough time for project concerns to be remedied and allow for questions to be answered.

GRE currently hosts open houses to inform communities about upcoming projects and to provide a project contact to whom they can direct questions or concerns. **Finding venues for open houses can be challenging.** However, project teams do their best to accommodate locations close to community members. One interviewee mentioned the importance of choosing a neutral space that is accessible to everyone in the community. They emphasized the importance of it feeling like a collaborative space where attendees feel comfortable asking questions.⁷

After understanding the current engagement process, we asked GRE staff where they would like to see improvements in their processes. GRE projects often have overlapping stakeholders who will participate in open houses. Due to this, one interviewee mentioned the importance of having **standardized project visuals and information**

⁶ Transmission Team Interview

⁷ Transmission Team Interview

sheets.⁸ By providing stakeholders with consistent information, they will not be surprised by any deviations from other project meetings they attended. This also allows opportunities for them to learn and understand the information being presented, enabling more long-term, collaborative engagement.

Our team also conducted interviews with three of GRE's stakeholders to understand how their organizations engage with energy projects and any improvements they would like to see with engagement efforts. A pattern that emerged throughout our interview process was **concern for a lack of community turnout during information sessions.** There were a few mentions by GRE staff and stakeholders that "the same ten people" are the only ones engaged in the process, and they would like to see an increase in attendance at project meetings and open houses.⁹ A few mentioned they would like to see options to incentivize community participation and that it is vital for communities to feel valued to encourage long-term, meaningful engagement.

As a part of the public engagement process, several interviewees expressed the desire for improvements in education. Currently, GRE partners with organizations like Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) to provide education and outreach opportunities to member-owners. In addition, interviewees would like to see ways to **meet communities where they are and provide material that is easily translated and understood.** One stakeholder mentioned that it might be beneficial to have education sessions before any project meetings are conducted.¹⁰ That would allow the community members to learn about their communities' energy systems and how projects may improve their energy resiliency. To facilitate this, GRE interviewees would like to have **tools to improve stakeholder engagement when interacting with communities.**

2. *Participants identified missed opportunities to sustain engagement with young people, which is an important concern for the future workforce, especially since many are leaving rural communities.*

Throughout our interviews with both GRE staff and stakeholders, we found that **engaging with young people is essential for strengthening community ties, advancing cooperative principles, and supporting long-term workforce development.** To support this, GRE is engaging with schools to better understand their

⁸ Transmission Team Interview

⁹ Media Team, Transmission Team, and Stakeholder Interviews

¹⁰ Stakeholder Interview

needs and priorities while building strong relationships with teachers and counselors. Outreach efforts primarily focus on high school students, with additional attention given to connecting with higher education institutions, particularly technical schools, across the service area. Staff emphasized the importance of expanding these efforts beyond the Twin Cities to reach young people in rural communities.¹¹

Current student engagement activities include:

- Conduct classroom visits
- Participate in panel discussions
- Provide internships
- Offer scholarships
- Host a one-day Cooperative Careers Camp
- Table at job fairs

Despite these efforts, staff identified the ongoing challenge of maintaining lasting connections with young people. For example, while GRE may initially engage with a student interested in a specific career path, sustaining that connection over time can be difficult.¹² This highlights the need for new strategies to deepen and maintain student relationships beyond initial outreach. Additionally, staff noted the importance of broadening employee involvement in recruitment efforts. One interviewee proposed involving school alumni who are now employed at GRE to serve as ambassadors during the recruitment process.¹³ GRE is interested in exploring additional engagement strategies to strengthen these efforts.

3. Participants identified a need for fidelity to best practices and consistency in sharing information.

One area of interest among GRE staff was standardizing project management methods and improving internal and external communication. “Communicate early and often” was an expression often used by most divisions, reflecting their perception of member importance and the organizational culture at GRE, which is essential to the progress and success of any project.¹⁴ One staff member mentioned that although they are producing regular project status reports for projects, it would be helpful to have automated tools

¹¹ Human Resources Team Interview

¹² Human Resources Team Interview

¹³ Human Resources Team Interview

¹⁴ Transmission Team and IT/Project Management Team Interview

for communicating with both internal and external project sponsors and stakeholders.¹⁵ It is also noted that GRE has information-sharing teams that facilitate communication between GRE and member-owners.¹⁶ However, currently, **there is no standardized process beyond status updates for communicating project updates to key internal stakeholders or community members.** The same interviewee also deemed standardizing project management methods to be important.¹⁷ Although only one party mentioned this explicitly, aligning project management processes better can enhance communication with cross-divisional stakeholders and member-owners. It was also noted during the focus group that working with member-owners and partnering between departments on project work and project management processes could benefit GRE. For instance, there are Generation and Transmission IT meetings, but more departments could benefit from collaborating further. Also, there is a lack of information shared across groups; for example, Transmission isn't currently providing feedback on Media community engagement efforts related to their project work.¹⁸ Lastly, as mentioned in the findings on barriers, standardizing project visuals is essential across all projects so that community members can better understand and engage.¹⁹ Standardizing map layers, project fact sheets, and communication plans improves the sharing of information, benefiting both internal teams and external stakeholders.

Recommendations

Employees at GRE engage with a wide range of stakeholders in various aspects of their work, including community projects, workforce development, recruitment efforts, and internal communications. Communication and engagement are paramount for organizations to function at their highest level.²⁰ GRE has a strong cooperative culture that prioritizes the well-being of its member-owners and employees, contributing to the organization's overall effectiveness. With this in mind, our recommendations are intended to adjust the current system.

¹⁵ IT/Project Management Team Interview

¹⁶ IT/Project Management Note

¹⁷ IT/Project Management Team Interview

¹⁸ Focus Group Finding

¹⁹ Transmission Team Interview

²⁰ Black, J. M., & La Venture, K. (2015). *The human factor to profitability: building a people-centered culture for long-term success* (First edition.). River Grove Books.

The recommendations in this section are based on our main findings. First, it is essential to address barriers concerning community participation. Next, we provide guidance on building and sustaining relationships with young people, and finally, we offer suggestions for standardizing project operations.

Recommendation #1: Address barriers to community participation.

Rural communities face an array of challenges that are unique to their geographic landscapes, economic conditions, and the individuals who live there. Many interviewees mentioned the importance of ensuring that communities can understand the information being presented to them at project meetings. They also mentioned issues with increasing community engagement. The National Center for State Courts (NCSC)²¹ has explored ways to increase community engagement and address barriers that fall into four main categories: awareness, logistical, cultural/social, and personal/motivational.²² The NCSC community involvement toolkit can be found in Appendix C. Some of the most common reasons for lack of local participation identified by the NCSC include a lack of multilingual resources, no inclusion of interpreters, limited awareness of engagement events, feelings of intimidation or anxiety to participate, lack of transportation, events being located too far away, insufficient health or accessibility accommodations and an overall lack of time to participate.²³ It is essential first to understand the specific communities involved to improve engagement effectively and identify and address the particular barriers they face.

²¹ The National Center for State Courts (NCSC) is a group of experts, dedicated researchers, consultants and former practitioners who are committed to advancing just, free, and safe communities. NCSC has a framework aimed at engaging marginalized and disenfranchised communities to ensure equal access and improve the trust and confidence those communities have in their practices. This framework was chosen due to alignment with cooperative goals and community engagement.

²² National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications,-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

²³ National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications,-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

Meeting Communities Where They Are

Energy systems are complex topics that many people find difficult to understand. Therefore, **efforts should be made to help communities understand how decisions, infrastructure placement, and project outcomes are determined to show that their input will be taken into consideration.**

Education could be the first step in improving engagement in communities. One stakeholder mentioned that having education sessions that are separate from project meetings could be very impactful for communities, especially when it comes to large energy issues that are more complex.²⁴ These education sessions could be done at the distributed cooperative level to ensure all members have the opportunity to participate. The DOE has created an Energy Literacy Framework that includes seven principles that are fundamental energy concepts that can be incorporated into energy education, depending on the intended audience. This framework emphasizes the energy concepts that will help citizens make informed energy decisions and provide opportunities for innovation for how they would like to see energy systems in their communities operate.²⁵ The DOE's Energy Literacy Framework can be found in Appendix C.

The Center for Earth, Energy, and Democracy also has facilitation guides that could be used to help educate community members about energy systems in their community. The facilitation guides include a home energy use exercise to help individuals understand the various energy sources their households use throughout the day. They also include a building our neighborhood exercise and an energy sources exercise to help communities understand the energy infrastructure that exists in the area and the different energy demands that the area has, including schools, hospitals, and other economic industries that may exist.²⁶ This facilitation guide can be found in Appendix C.

Awareness Barriers

To ensure that all parts of the community are represented during the decision-making process, **developers should begin by working with local contacts to identify key stakeholders.** One stakeholder mentioned it is important to find local champions in the

²⁴ Stakeholder Interview

²⁵ DOE (2017). Energy Literacy Framework: A Quick Start Guide for Educators. Department of Energy. https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2015/03/f20/EnergyLiteracy_QuickStartGuide.pdf

²⁶ Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy (n.d.) Facilitation Guide: Resilient Energy Systems. Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy. CEED-Resilient-Energy-Systems.docx.pdf

community who can bring you into their space.²⁷ This can help establish trust in groups and provide new avenues to develop relationships. These stakeholders may include utilities, community groups, Indigenous communities, energy-burdened communities, government agencies, cultural or religious organizations, and non-profit entities. Engaging these groups early allows for communication networks to be developed and used to share information with community members.

Developers should invest time in understanding how community decisions are made and how local planning processes typically unfold. It is important to work with community members to identify any areas that the community wants to protect and ensure that the project aligns with the values, constraints, and concerns of the community.²⁸ The initiatives of the project should be framed to demonstrate how the project may impact the surrounding geographic area and communities' daily lives throughout project development.²⁹ This will allow for transparency of project outcomes and allow communities opportunities to ask questions and have their concerns addressed.

In rural communities, word travels fast. Having an understanding of how information is typically shared can be leveraged to enhance outreach efforts. Targeted social media posts, press releases, and posting flyers in frequently visited locations in town are communication strategies that can help increase awareness of project meetings and open houses. Developers can also take advantage of local events by participating as sponsors and creating casual conversation settings that allow community members to develop relationships with staff. Partnering with local organizations can further amplify messaging and encourage participation from diverse community members. Incorporating trusted community leaders can foster trust in the planning process and allow for more meaningful collaboration.³⁰

²⁷ Stakeholder Interview

²⁸ FEMA (2020). A Guide to Supporting Engagement and Resiliency in Rural Communities. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_rural-guide_jan-2021.pdf

²⁹ Thomas, T. (2023). Three Community Engagement Strategies to Increase Public Participation in 2024. PM Magazine. ICMA. <https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/three-community-engagement-strategies-increase-public-participation-2024>

³⁰ National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications,-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

Logistical Barriers

Choosing a location to host town halls or open houses should be thoughtfully chosen to be accessible to the community it is targeting. Steps can be taken to identify energy-burdened communities, ensuring that community outreach and engagement are inclusive and accommodating to ensure participation in project conversations. Project maps can be overlaid with demographic measures, including income, race, and English language proficiency, to ensure that vulnerable communities are considered throughout the life of the project.³¹ Locations should be close to residents in a familiar venue to encourage participation. If meeting locations in the area are scarce, another option is to acquire an office trailer that can be set up in close proximity to the community.

Understanding the various industries in a community can help inform practical meeting times. Rural communities typically have agricultural industries that limit community members' availability during planting and harvest season. Planning efforts should ensure that meeting options are available outside of these seasons to allow farmers to participate. Times to consider should include lunch hour, evening, and weekend times in order to accommodate people who work various hours. Local events that offer opportunities for tabling can be another resource for informing community members about project processes. If the event allows, an open house session could also be incorporated into the event activities.

Transportation barriers should also be studied for rural communities, considering that residents live various distances from in-town locations. Some residents may also have transportation limitations due to extreme weather and nighttime driving conditions. In cases of dangerous travel, virtual options can be a good alternative. For other transportation barriers, developers could offer transportation to and from open houses. This may also encourage more residents to participate, knowing they do not have to use their personal vehicles or gas to attend the event. Another option to remedy transportation barriers would be to provide a transportation stipend to reimburse community members' travel costs for attending.³²

³¹ Thomas, T. (2023). Three Community Engagement Strategies to Increase Public Participation in 2024. PM Magazine. ICMA. <https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/three-community-engagement-strategies-increase-public-participation-2024>

³² National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications,-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

Childcare is another important service that can be provided at open houses. This would incentivize families to participate without worrying about the costs of hiring a babysitter. If this option cannot be accommodated for the meeting location, childcare reimbursements can be given as an alternative.³³ Working families have many responsibilities that can be barriers to attending community engagement events. By providing help with childcare, these community members may be more willing to participate in project meetings.

Cultural and Social Barriers

Communities often represent a rich diversity of cultures and social dynamics, which must be understood to address the barriers that may prevent participation effectively. Engaging with community leaders is a valuable way to gain insight into the cultural groups and specific needs that should be accommodated during the planning process.³⁴ This will also provide insight into dates and times that may not be optimal for groups due to cultural reasons. Language barriers can be reduced by offering translators or American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, allowing all community members to participate fully. Additionally, project materials should be made available in all languages spoken in the community, in both physical and digital formats. It is also essential to consider special needs accommodations when choosing a meeting location, ensuring individuals of varied abilities can attend and engage meaningfully.³⁴

Personal and Motivational Barriers

Historically, rural communities have been excluded from significant modernization efforts, including the electrification of the United States. In the 1930s, nine out of ten urban homes had access to electricity, while only one out of ten farms did.³⁵ Investor-owned utilities considered the infrastructure costs too high to serve the sparsely populated rural areas. In response, efforts were set forth by President Franklin D.

³³ National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications,-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

³⁴ National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications,-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

³⁵ Sablik, T. (2020). Electrifying Rural America. Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/econ_focus/2020/q1/economic_history

Roosevelt to create rural cooperatives in order to provide electrical services to their members.³⁶ Today, rural communities face new challenges that impact their economic well-being. To ensure these communities are not overlooked once again, it is essential to maintain transparency throughout the planning process and to treat community concerns with care and respect.

Uncertainty can be reduced by clearly communicating the project's purpose, identifying who will be involved in the planning process, and outlining the activities that will support continued engagement throughout the project's duration.³⁷ To foster trust and sustained involvement, community members should be compensated for their time and input, recognizing the value they bring to the process. Compensation might include meals during meetings, gift cards, cash payments, coupons, or bill credits.³⁸ Acknowledging the time community members sacrifice helps encourage ongoing participation. Given the demands of busy schedules, sending reminders via email or phone calls shortly before events can also increase turnout and engagement.³⁹

Recommendation #2: Develop and maintain relationships with young people.

Youth development efforts are a key component of sustaining rural communities. For instance, workforce development supports local economies, promotes equitable opportunities, and helps sustain communities through education, training, and job creation.⁴⁰ Providing education and accessible career opportunities is key to retaining

³⁶ Sablik, T. (2020). Electrifying Rural America. Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond.

https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/econ_focus/2020/q1/economic_history

³⁷ National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications.-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

³⁸ National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications.-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

³⁹ National Center for State Courts (NCSC). (n.d.). Step 1C: Identifying and Overcoming Participation Barriers. National Center for State Courts (NCSC). <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/communications.-civics-and-disinformation/community-engagement/toolkit/step-1-recruit/step-1c-identifying-and-overcoming-participation-barriers>

⁴⁰ USDA Rural Development Innovation Center. (n.d.). USDA Resource Guide for Rural Workforce Development. In *USDA Rural Development Innovation Center*. https://www.rd.usda.gov/sites/default/files/usdard_ruralworkforceguide508.pdf

young people and attracting new residents, helping to counteract population decline.⁴¹ However, these efforts only succeed when young people and future workers are genuinely motivated and well-prepared to take advantage of the opportunities made possible by investments, such as federal support.⁴² Support from stakeholders like Great River Energy plays an important role in student engagement by partnering with local community schools and colleges, and hosting career camps that introduce students to opportunities in the energy sector.⁴³

Cross-divisional Communication for Workforce Development.

One finding showed that communication with a diverse array of internal employees about student outreach is needed.

Just like hosting community events can help members feel engaged and informed, internal workshop meetings can also help employees become more involved with outreach. Visibility and “engaging early and often” can also be applied to the student outreach strategy. When planning events for student outreach that require help from various departments throughout GRE, **hosting an internal event or meeting can bring the right employees together to learn about what has been accomplished and where their help is needed moving forward.** During the focus group, we had a high level of cross-divisional engagement, and the importance of the work to be done with community engagement and outreach was beginning to be realized. Continuing to unite divisions and groups will help advance the outreach goal.

Recommendation on whom to engage upfront:

- Leaders and Department Heads. When they learn about the value offered to them, such as potential team members for the future and the outreach successes so far, they can be instrumental in helping inspire their team to join in on outreach work.
- Individual employees. An employee who has previously helped with outreach and events may work in transmission, for example, but they may also know an

⁴¹ National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions. (2023). *Investing in rural Capacity: key findings around workforce development, training, and education*. <https://ag.purdue.edu/rrdc/docs/rrdc-listening-session-workforce-report-feb2023.pdf>

⁴² BlueGreen Alliance | *Summary of key policy provisions*. (n.d.). <https://www.bluegreenalliance.org/site/summary-of-key-policy-provisions>

⁴³ Great River Energy. (2024, July 11). *Sparking cooperative career journeys*. <https://greatriverenergy.com/community/sparking-cooperative-career-journeys/>

employee in IT who could add significant value to the outreach conversation. Networking can often yield valuable input.

Automation Tool for Workforce Development Outreach

Another finding was that strategies are required for GRE to maintain relationships with students they have engaged with in their student outreach programs.

Engaging stakeholders can be difficult in itself, and maintaining relationships with graduates can be even more challenging. A second recommendation is to **use a marketing automation or newsletter tool, such as Brevo or GetResponse, to automate emails sent to employees and stakeholders involved in student outreach programs.**

- Automate engaging emails, which can be sent within or outside the organization. They often have many templates to work with. Brevo, for example, integrates your organization's colors, fonts, and logos just by providing it with your organization's URL.
- Create a standardized template and send it to schools that have previously worked with you, requesting further engagement with students once a year, before they graduate or move on to their next institution.
- Also, a tool like this could be helpful for new campaigns and student outreach.
 - With tracking engagement, a tool like this can help communicate at the early stages of a project, likely by the communications team. If less engagement is received than expected from an email campaign, a different approach (such as mail, in-person events, etc.) may be better suited for that group or cooperative members.

Create a student mentorship program.

Based on feedback from staff and stakeholders, we recommend that GRE explore the implementation of a student mentorship program. Such a program would **provide consistent one-on-one support, allowing students to build authentic relationships, set future goals, and stay engaged over time.** One stakeholder emphasized the importance of providing students with long-term mentorship as a way to create deeper relationships with adults, similar to the benefits of leadership coaching. Additionally, the stakeholders noted that meaningful impact requires going beyond a one-day event, highlighting the importance of sustained engagement and follow-through to support

student growth. In turn, this type of program would benefit the community by **creating a more engaged and informed population of young people, better equipped to contribute to sustaining and growing the regional economy.** Engaging staff as mentors can build trust and lasting connections that deepen student involvement and expand their understanding of different career paths and opportunities for growth. Additionally, this approach presents a valuable opportunity to connect students with the energy sector and introduce them to the cooperative model, potentially opening doors to career paths they may not have previously considered. Moreover, implementing a mentorship program could also offer several benefits to the cooperative. It can contribute to the **professional development of the future workforce, help identify potential interns and new hires, and provide leadership opportunities for current staff.**

We recognize that establishing the program requires time, effort, and coordinated commitment to succeed. This type of program must be tailored to fit both the cooperative's goals and the students' needs and interests, ensuring that intentional relationships are built. To start, it could be helpful to evaluate the capacity to launch a smaller-scale program, enabling the cooperative to test and refine the mentorship approach as they see fit.

Potential steps to consider:

1. Conduct an internal assessment to determine capacity, interest, and resources.
2. Define program goals.
3. Establish requirements for participation.
4. Identify and engage school partners to support recruitment and coordination.
5. Establish mentor activities and guidelines.
6. Acquire and train mentors.
7. Acquire students.
8. Match mentors with students.
9. Set up feedback mechanisms to monitor progress.
10. Monitor progress and evaluate outcomes for future improvements and enhance student outcomes.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ SHRM. (2023, November 14). Creating A Mentor Program.

<https://www.shrm.org/membership/students/creating-mentor-program>; McMillan, A. (n.d.). Encouraging Students Through a Mentoring Program. Educators Blog.

<https://www.graduateprogram.org/blog/encouraging-students-through-a-mentoring-program/>

Connect to rural communities through high school organizations.

Throughout the interviews, staff and stakeholders also mentioned efforts to connect with high school students to increase youth engagement in rural communities. In light of this and GRE's ongoing efforts, we recommend that GRE **explore partnerships with high school organizations such as local FFA chapters, business clubs, robotics teams, and other STEM-focused programs.** Building relationships with high school organizations opens up another avenue for engaging with students. Forming these connections provides a valuable opportunity to engage directly with students. By offering classroom visits, hands-on workshops, or informational sessions, GRE can build relationships with youth while increasing awareness of career paths that combine agriculture, business, technology, and energy. These initiatives can be further enhanced by leveraging the cooperative's resources and expertise to help students develop targeted skills aligned with local industry needs. Such engagement benefits the broader community by strengthening local talent pipelines, encouraging young people to remain in or return to their communities, and contributing to long-term economic development. In addition to workforce preparation, these efforts also help build a broader understanding of cooperatives and the significance of cooperative membership as a community-driven organization.

FFA Chapters

As a core component of agricultural education through the National FFA Organization, Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs) offer students the ability “to consider multiple careers and occupations, learn expected workplace behavior, develop specific skills within an industry, and are given opportunities to apply academic and occupational skills in the workplace or a simulated workplace environment.”⁴⁵ By partnering with FFA chapters, GRE would be able to **offer students concrete opportunities, such as internships (paid or unpaid), mentorship, and/or hands-on training in agricultural and energy-related fields.** These opportunities allow students to engage with real-world challenges and contribute to advancement in both sectors. In addition, students may receive recognition through proficiency awards for their SAE projects. Award categories relevant to the energy sector include energy systems, technology, natural

⁴⁵ Minnesota FFA Association. (2024). Supervised Agricultural Experiences. Minnesota FFA Association. <https://www.mnffa.org/supervised-agricultural-experiences>

resources, communications, and education. Examples of student projects can be found in Appendix D.

To connect with FFA Chapter advisors, refer to the following directories:

- [Minnesota FFA Chapter Directory](#)
- [Wisconsin FFA Chapter Directory](#)

Business Clubs

Business clubs, such as Business Professionals of America (BPA) and Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), provide a platform for introducing students to entrepreneurship and financial literacy. GRE could build on this by **introducing students to the cooperative business model, emphasizing its democratic structure, member ownership, and community-focused values**. This opportunity reinforces core business concepts and exposes students to real-world applications in the energy sector and rural development, providing a deeper understanding of sustainable business practices.

Engagement could include interactive workshops like “Co-ops 101,” where cooperative staff guide students through real decision-making scenarios. Staff could work with educators to co-develop case studies that explore how cooperatives manage capital, maintain member trust, and respond to challenges such as technological change or rural infrastructure needs. For a more personalized, one-on-one experience, students could spend time shadowing cooperative staff to actively observe day-to-day operations. These initiatives benefit students by **providing practical experience with community-driven business models while also helping them develop skills in finance, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement**.

To connect with schools with BPA Chapters, refer to the following source:

<https://www.mnbpa.org/regioninfo>.

Robotics and Other STEM-related Clubs

Robotics and other STEM-related clubs also provide opportunities to engage students with the technical side of the energy industry. By partnering with these groups, the cooperative can **support project-based learning, innovation challenges, and skill development in areas such as coding, engineering, and renewable energy**

systems. For example, one stakeholder mentioned the potential for challenge grants with local sponsors as a way to encourage participation and promote inclusive representation among students and mentors. The cooperative might also consider sponsoring a robotics team or providing mentorship, actively contributing to students' development. Additionally, staff expressed interest in facilitating connections between students and internship opportunities to further strengthen career pathways.

To connect with schools with robotics clubs, refer to the following source:

<https://www.mshsl.org/sports-and-activities/robotics>.

Recommendation #3: Consistency within project operations.

Standardization is a great way to ensure dependable outcomes and uniformity across project processes, ensuring stakeholders and the community are consistently engaged. We have two main recommendations in this arena. First, standardizing communication in project management methods, and second, standardizing project materials and communication plans.

Project Management Methods: Standardization and Communication with Project Sponsors

Two areas of interest among GRE staff were improving communication between cross-divisional groups and standardizing project management methods for consistent project communication with sponsors and stakeholders, such as board members. Engaging the appropriate stakeholders, collecting feedback on how to interact with them, and keeping them informed are essential elements for the success of any project. The more visibility a project has, the better. “Communicate early and often” is a widely implemented strategy at GRE, and this strategy can be just as important for internal communication as it is for external communication. No matter the project, showing relevant stakeholders, including the board and other member-owners, your progress helps them feel closer to and more comfortable with the vital work and its outcomes.

Effective internal communication with project sponsors and stakeholders is crucial for project success and consistent community engagement. When sponsors and stakeholders are kept informed throughout a project, their expertise and concerns can be better considered, and their approval, where necessary, is more easily acquired.

Recommendations for internal communication with project sponsors and board members and project standardization/organization (cohesive deliverables, universal templates, etc.):

- **Implement a project management tool with a uniform reporting dashboard that updates automatically.** Enable it to send automatic emails with dashboard information, such as critical path deliverables, deliverable percent complete, risks, and general project information, at your preferred intervals (e.g., biweekly). Alternatively, capture the dashboard information and personalize it in a manual email update on a biweekly, monthly, or other schedule to the relevant internal stakeholders, project sponsors, or member-owner board members. Examples of automation tools of this nature are Smartsheet, Nifty, and Basecamp. Tools like these can help inform internal and external stakeholders, ensuring communication consistency.
 - Note: These tools are full project management software. They can be used to manage all aspects of a project.
 - If the existing project management tool being used has automation or dashboard features, determine how to utilize them and work through best practices with the team.

- For project management standardization, **implement a universal product development process (PDP).** Whether a new product is involved or not, the steps and key gate reviews in this process will help guide any project along its path uniformly. The Project Management Institute offers a high-level version of this framework that any organization can adopt. Reference a guide for this: [New Product Development Process](#).⁴⁶ In a process like this, sponsors are regularly consulted at major review points in the project, ensuring its success. Implementing a universal PDP will aid in communication with high-visibility projects and the member-owner board. Bringing a well-thought-out PDP process suggestion to the enterprise project management team could help implement it company-wide.
 - When implementing a new product development process, choices can be made about a universal set of deliverables for the project management organization (PMO). This could also be divided into project types, such as

⁴⁶Schmitt, P. (2003). New product development: tools, tips and techniques. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2003—North America, Baltimore, MD. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute. <https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/new-products-development-tools-tips-techniques-7684>

transmission, which has a standard set of standards, and IT, which has a different set. Regardless, this set of deliverables provides uniformity and, therefore, more reliable and often more on-time results for members.

- Uniformity in this process also sets the tone that the PMO is a dependable and high-functioning organization. They can be relied on to produce excellent results every time. How a project manager runs their project within this template (team engagement, timing, etc.) can be executed as they prefer, but the results will be consistent, making them easier to understand for project sponsors and stakeholders across all projects.

Consistency of Project Components

Findings for this category included the need for standardization to occur across projects in a few ways:

- Map layers should be synonymous for all projects
- Project fact sheets should be standardized
- Communication Plans should be standardized

Standardizing these materials can help members better understand the content being presented to them and the information being communicated, fostering better continuity of communication and long-term engagement.

Standardization of Map Layers:

Map layers across all projects have not historically been the same. For example, future transmission lines may be marked as red and one project, but blue in another. Our recommendation is to **establish a universal standard for mapping across projects, where features such as roads, crane paths, right-of-way (ROWS), easements, setbacks, T-line, and Pole symbols are consistent for all future projects.** This will ensure that members and project stakeholders can easily understand the materials being presented to them, regardless of the project or community in which the information is being shared.

Standardization of Project Fact Sheets:

Not all project fact sheets look the same or provide the same type of information, even if projects are similar. Our suggestion is to create a universal standard template, organized by project size, for project fact sheets. This template may include different

standard details based on the project type, but it will visually appear the same and provide consistent information in categories relevant to the project. This helps project stakeholders and members feel consistent with the quality of work GRE provides.

Standardization of Communication Plans:

Communication Plans should be standardized using the project management methods mentioned above, as well as between departments. For example, outreach communications performed at the beginning stages of a project should flow into information that project management shares as the project is in development, and the style of communication or template should be relatively consistent for continuity. This will help members and project stakeholders better understand the stages of projects and how they impact them.

Limitations and Next Steps

As with many studies, this one has limitations that should be acknowledged. The interview process included personnel from Transmission, IT/Project Management, Media, HR, as well as a few stakeholders from the Community Benefit Plan Stakeholder Group. However, a more extensive interview project may be necessary to develop a truly comprehensive communication plan that supports successful engagement. To do this, representation from additional GRE staff divisions, a broader range of stakeholder groups, and the inclusion of cooperative member-owners are required to ensure that diverse perspectives are captured.⁴⁷

Following our presentation, we held a discussion with GRE staff on the next actionable steps. Those steps include:

- 1. IT Information Sharing and Project Management Strategies:**
 - Collaborate with the IT department to ensure consistency when sharing project information via enterprise dashboards.
- 2. Increasing Community Participation:**

⁴⁷ Refer to Appendix E for possible survey or interview questions related to community engagement efforts for cooperative member-owners.

- Expand employee participation in rural community events to build stronger relationships. This approach has shown success in the past and is considered valuable for continued engagement.
- Offer incentives, such as mailing out coupons for a free hat or meal, to encourage community attendance at events.

3. Follow through on HR and Recruitment Initiatives:

- Develop and implement standard outreach templates to streamline communication and reduce staff time.
- Partner with other divisions to launch a mentorship program, enhancing employee development and collaboration.
- Increase outreach to student groups such as robotics clubs, FFA, and other STEM-related organizations to build future talent pipelines and community connections.

Conclusion

This report analyzed how Great River Energy can improve its community engagement strategies, particularly regarding its clean energy initiatives. Through interviews, observations, and one focus group with GRE staff and stakeholders, the team identified barriers to effective participation, challenges in sustaining student involvement, and inconsistencies in project communication and project management methods. Based on these insights, we recommend addressing engagement barriers by meeting communities where they are, enhancing student outreach and mentorship opportunities, and standardizing project operations and communications to support more meaningful, equitable, and long-lasting relationships with communities and stakeholders.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol Questions

1. Could you introduce yourself and describe your role at Great River Energy?
2. How do you involve stakeholders in the conceptualization/planning of a project?
Please, specify the stakeholders or types of stakeholders involved.
 - a. What does communication with stakeholders look like at this phase?
 - b. How do you address stakeholders' concerns and needs during planning?
 - c. What changes or improvements would you like to see implemented?
3. How does your team ensure continuous engagement with stakeholders during project implementation? Please, specify the stakeholders or types of stakeholders involved.
 - a. What does communication with stakeholders look like at this phase?
 - b. How do you address stakeholders' concerns and needs during project implementation?
 - c. What changes or improvements would you like to see implemented?
4. In what ways do stakeholders help evaluate the project, and how is this used in decision-making? Please, specify the stakeholders or types of stakeholders involved.
 - a. What does communication with stakeholders look like at this phase?
 - b. How do you address stakeholders' concerns and needs during project evaluation?
 - c. What changes or improvements would you like to see implemented?
5. How do you approach making modifications to community engagement for future projects based on stakeholder feedback?
 - a. Are there any additional stakeholders who should be included?
6. What information would be helpful for enhancing stakeholder mapping and engagement in future projects?
 - a. Is there any helpful information a stakeholder would be able to provide?
7. Is there anyone else we should talk with? If so, would you be able to introduce us?

Appendix B: Community Engagement Tables

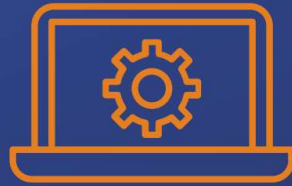
Transmission



Community Engagement

Transmission

	Planning	Implementation	Evaluation
What does communication look like at this stage?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly board meetings • Variety of open houses • Fact sheets • Websites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designated project contact • Monthly newsletter • Electronic Emails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarterly meetings with transmission and distribution • Thank you adds
What Stakeholders are involved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member Owners • Landowners & Farmers • Local County Stakeholders • Government Agencies • DOC & PUC • MISO (RTO) • Tribal Nations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landowners • MN PUC • Agencies • Permit Compliance 	
How do you address Stakeholder concerns?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce projects ASAP • Ensuring risks are addressed • Land impact considerations • Keeping everyone informed through the life of the project • Prompt response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 on 1 conversations • Consistency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hotline
Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have an understanding of options for technologies (cost-effective?) • How do we thoughtfully engage with new stakeholder groups? • Have early engagements & get agencies on board, not to surprise them • Would like Tools to provide great engagement • Strategies to "Meet Communities Where They Are" - can we explain these complex projects in a better way? • Strategies to increase participation in town halls • Having standardized maps for projects (layers) • Consistant approaches to how we communicate - Fact Sheets 		



Community Engagement

IT

	Planning	Implementation	Evaluation
What does communication look like at this stage?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather Requirements • Engaging vendors & members • ASAP engagement • Kick off meetings • Simplifying complex terms 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback from stakeholders on project success
What Stakeholders are involved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify IT to Business • Interfacing Stakeholders • Members and Vendors • Identify member owner impacts 	Project Sponsors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board Members • Depends on the PM
How do you address Stakeholder concerns?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status Reports • Status Meetings 	
Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements to communication plans • How do they want to be communicated with? What format? • How often should you touch base? • Partner more with other G&T's • Work with member-owners on PMO process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include stakeholders in interactive meetings • Translate technical terms to business terms • Consistent formats for information sharing • Formalize processes for project sizes • Consistent deliverables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons learned process & standardization • Stakeholder communication plan • Identify all stakeholders • Make sure sponsors agree to plan • Exculpation path; binary with decision-making



Community Engagement

Media

	Planning	Implementation	Evaluation
What does communication look like at this stage?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educating the community • Convey economic impacts to local businesses • Using letters, post cards, press releases & open houses • Stakeholder audits & phone interviews • Translate technical language to be easily understood • Pitching new ideas to local media or trade magazines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media continues through permitting to completion • Holding engagement meetings • Sharing information on sound, traffic, ect. • Sponsorships • Reputation Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tone of coverage • Highlight benefits • Positive press coverage
What Stakeholders are involved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County governments • Municipalities • Communities & Landowners • GRE Board • Impacted Groups • CURE, MFU, LIUNA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Members • Legislature Support • GRE Board • Neighbors closest to project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong Meeting Attendance • Those who watch/read the news
How do you address Stakeholder concerns?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education and story telling • Open and honest communication • Two-way interaction • Early & often communication • Listening 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful completion of project
Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to increase attendance at community meetings • Alternative meeting locations - not everyone wants to go to city hall • Can there be incentives to bring more people to meetings? • What would Tribes like to see from utility scale public outreach? How can we collaborate with them in a meaningful way? • What do small town city council or county commissioners want to see with utility scale public outreach? • In person and virtual meeting options 		



Community Engagement

HR & Workforce Development

<p>How does GRE interact with workforce development?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Outreach • Career Fairs • Camps • Community Outreach • Facilitate Panels, Events • Show up to Events 		
<p>What type of stakeholders do you interact with to support workforce development?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GRE employees • GRE board • Co-op communities • Colleges & Tech Schools • K-12 schools • MN DEED • Veterans • Unions • Communities they serve • Clean Energy Economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BG Alliance • Vocational Reps • Student Organizations • Professional Organizations • Instructors • Highschool • Universities • Tech Schools 	
<p>How do you address workforce development concerns?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal conversations and dialog • Presentations to board members • Helping Co-op members with job postings, screening candidates and interviews • Bring schools into career camps so they can learn about different careers • Keeping up with new trends • Review and watch economic trends • Chatting with manufacturers • Internship program • Retention planning 		
<p>Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways to improve internal communications to engage employees in student outreach in different locations • Would like to have a diverse array of employees sign up for different student engagement events • Would like strategies to keep connections with students after they graduate • Website updates - "toot our horn more" • Tools to attract new generations • Pre-candidate guide to get passive candidates interested in GRE 		

Appendix C: Community Engagement Resources

National Center for State Courts

Identifying and Overcoming Barriers to Recruitment and Community Involvement From the Engage! Toolkit for Courts

Identify the barriers likely to affect your target groups—and strategies you can use to overcome those barriers—so more people and groups are involved in your engagement.

Directions for analyzing barriers and strategies:

- REVIEW: List the target groups, agencies, and individuals that you would like to engage. Use the groups you identified on worksheet “Recruitment and Community Involvement: Identify Partners and Participants.”
- List the logistical, cultural, personal, and other barriers that may prevent these groups/people from attending and participating in your engagement. See list of example barriers to get started.
- Brainstorm strategies for overcoming the barriers. See examples of strategies to get started.
- Work with representative partners from target audiences to identify additional specific barriers facing their community and evaluate the likely effectiveness of different logistical, cultural, and motivational solutions.
- Evaluate the likelihood of success of the strategies you will employ to encourage attendance.

Examples of Barriers and Barrier-Reduction Strategies

Potential Barriers	Potential Strategies
Logistical	
• Inaccessible times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider lunch hour, evening, weekend times • Offer multiple time options to address differing schedules
• Inaccessible places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct engagements in proximate locations (e.g., community centers) • Provide transportation assistance and ensure available parking
• Family care obligations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide childcare at the event • Offer monetary assistance for child care costs likely to be incurred
• Lack of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct at a meal time and provide the meal • Conduct during planned events that people are already attending
Cultural/Social	
• Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide interpreters and materials in multiple languages
• Ability/disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure accommodations are available for persons of varied abilities
• Trust/Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train or work with community leaders to recruit, conduct, and/or facilitate the engagements. If appropriate, court actors could observe or the leaders could report back to the courts
Personal/Motivational	
• Trust/Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with trusted leaders in the community to determine what would increase trust in the process given lack of trust in the courts • Communicate with transparency, care/concern, honesty, vulnerability • Reduce uncertainty by providing additional detail about the purpose, invitees, and activities that will take place during the engagement
• Lack of interest or prioritization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with community to define issues of high interest to its members • Provide incentives (gifts, cash, meals, coupons, and so on) • Use reminder emails or phone calls just prior to the event
Other/General	
• Reaching group members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use social media, press releases, flyers, outreach by partners • Use short, low-commitment “recruitment surveys” to generate interest, and then extend invitations to more in-depth engagements

Analysis of Barriers Matrix Tool

Target Group		Potential Barriers	Potential Strategies	Representative Partners and Strategy Evaluation
Example	<i>Indian/Native American participants (Could also list specific tribes and subgroups)</i>	<i>Time, transportation, childcare, lack of priority, lack of trust, few court actors share their culture (including conveners)</i>	<i>Conduct at local venue, offer gift card incentive, tribes assist with recruitment, Native American facilitator, share a meal</i>	<i>Tribal leaders and Consortium of Tribal, State, and Federal Courts assist with planning/recruitment (Strong plan overall)</i>

**Looking at the barriers and strategies you have identified, to what extent do they meet the following criteria?
(Note: This evaluation can be completed for each group/barrier, and/or for the set of groups/barriers.)**

	Weak (low) likelihood of success	Moderate likelihood of success	Strong (high) likelihood of success	Complete (very high) likelihood of success
✓ Barriers are verified by members of the target community as inclusive of all actual and likely barriers	Weak	Moderate	Strong	Complete
✓ Strategies verified by members of the target community as likely to be effective for their community	Weak	Moderate	Strong	Complete
✓ Adequate resources are available to employ the strategies that are necessary to ensure attendance	Weak	Moderate	Strong	Complete

Energy Literacy Framework

A Quick Start Guide for Educators

Energy – it’s everywhere! When you turn on the lights, listen to the radio, heat your home, fuel your car, or use a computer, you are using energy. Energy is crucial to everything we do and experience. Understanding energy can help us make better informed decisions about our homes, communities, and our nation.

If you are new to energy education, then the following answers to questions about Energy Literacy will help you get started. Start thinking and teaching about energy from the natural to the social sciences. In this guide, you will find references to resources for implementing Energy Literacy concepts in your classroom using the links below.

1) What is Energy Literacy?

To help guide educators and the public on the big ideas of Energy Literacy, the U.S. Department of Energy published the Energy Literacy: Essential Principles and Fundamental Concepts for Energy Education. This framework provides the essential energy concepts that, if understood and applied,

will help students to make informed energy decisions. To download a copy or order for your school, go to: <http://energy.gov/eere/education/downloads/get-free-copy-energy-literacy-framework>

2) Do I have to teach everything in the Energy Literacy framework?

No! No single person is expected to understand every detail about energy. The Energy Literacy framework helps to clarify key Principles to consider including in lessons. Your instruction is most likely to be effective when it focuses on

a small set of ideas at a time and takes into account what the student may have already learned.

To see the Energy Literacy Principles and Fundamental Concepts, download: http://energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2014/09/f18/Energy_Literacy_Low_Res_3.0.pdf

3) Do I have to be a science teacher to teach Energy Literacy concepts?

No! Energy Literacy looks at energy through the lens of natural science as well as social science. Energy issues require an understanding of civics, history, economics, sociology, psychology, and politics in addition to science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Energy issues are inherently interdisciplinary and provide an excellent opportunity for you to create a curriculum that integrates multiple disciplines, is project-based, and connected to

the community – local, state, national and global; critical attributes of a twenty-first century curriculum.

For ideas about lessons that relate Energy Literacy to: Social Studies, go to: <http://go.usa.gov/3aXPT>
Mathematics and English/Language Arts, download the “Teachers Guide” link at the bottom of: <http://energy.gov/eere/education/downloads/energy-literacy-videos>

4) I must implement my state’s standards. How do I relate the Energy Literacy framework to this requirement?

For most states, standards express the concepts and skills to be performed but leave curricular and instructional decisions to districts, schools, and teachers. The Energy Literacy framework is similar in its presentation and reflects what an Energy Literate student should know.

The fundamental concepts are designed to overlap state educational standards in meaningful and substantive ways. It is recommended that you look for alignment in the

standards you are required to implement and the concepts presented in the framework. For example:

For an alignment of the Energy Literacy Principles with the Next Generation Science Standards, go to: <http://energy.gov/eere/education/downloads/energy-literacy-videos>

At the bottom of the page, under the heading “Wondering how this all fits into the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)?,” click on “Energy Literacy Alignment Tools.”

5) How do I go about identifying learning experiences for students?

The framework clarifies the expectations of what an Energy Literate student will know. Those can guide the creation of a coherent instructional program that helps students achieve this understanding. After you have aligned your state's standards related to energy to the Fundamental Concepts

in Energy Literacy, you will need to identify the learning activities that will build your students' Energy Literacy.

Recognizing this crucial step, several organizations have developed resources to help you identify instructional activities that match your Energy Literacy objectives.

Three activities that are recommended as possible starting places are:

Elementary: Fun with the Sun — Teacher's Activity Guide for Elementary Grades K-2

<http://energy.gov/eere/education/downloads/fun-sun-teachers-activity-guide-elementary-grades-k-2-1>

Middle School: Energy for Keeps — Electricity and Renewable Energy Teacher Information

<http://energy.gov/eere/education/downloads/energy-keeps-electricity-and-renewable-energy-teacher-information>

High School: Watt Does It Cost To Use It?

<http://energy.gov/eere/education/downloads/watt-does-it-cost-use-it>

These resources, and more, are available by searching the "Education Toolbox Search" at:

<http://energy.gov/education-toolbox/search>

The "Filter by Energy Literacy Principle" option allows you

to search for activities by Essential Principle. You can then filter results further by resource type, topic, and grade level.

You can also find additional resources at the following sites:

CLEAN (Climate Literacy and Energy Awareness Network)
http://cleanet.org/clean/educational_resources/index.html

The "Refine the Results" toolbar allows you to search for activities according to "Energy Literacy Principles."

NARA (Northwest Advanced Renewables Alliance)
http://energyliteracyprinciples.org/advanced_search.aspx

The "Advanced Search" option allows you to search for grade level specific activities by Essential Principle or Fundamental Concept.

Watt's Up? The Lowdown on Energy, American Geosciences Institute
<http://www.agiweb.org/education/energy/index.html>

Provides activities according to energy resource topics. All activities are aligned to Energy Literacy Fundamental Concepts.

6) How can I develop my own Energy Literacy?

If you are interested in learning more about Energy Literacy as well as increasing your background knowledge of energy concepts, read the introductory pages of the Energy

Literacy Framework (pp. 1 – 4) at: http://energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2014/09/f18/Energy_Literacy_Low_Res_3.0.pdf

You can also prepare by previewing these materials, all of which are also great resources for students:

Energy Literacy Videos
<http://energy.gov/eere/education/downloads/energy-literacy-videos>

Provides a series of videos that match the Essential Principles and Fundamental Concepts of the Energy Literacy Framework.

Energy 101
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLACD8E92715335CB2>

A series of short videos that explain the fundamental concepts behind renewable energy sources and energy efficiency.

Switch Energy Education Project
<http://www.switchenergyproject.com/index.php>

This project works to build a base of understanding about energy, add a practical dimension to energy conversation, and promote energy efficiency.

7) What is the most important thing I can do to help students develop their Energy Literacy?

Get started, and enjoy learning with them about the many ways energy affects our lives.



Facilitation Guide

Resilient Energy Systems

How Does Our Energy System Function?

This facilitation guide is designed to initiate conversation, build on experienced knowledge, and develop collective community action as we consider the positive impacts from renewable energy sources. We hope that this workshop informs attendees of the various energy sources, and how energy reaches your home, and the communities in which we live, work, play, learn, and pray.

Materials Needed

Neighborhood Building Materials

- Medium-Large building blocks
- Railroad set
- Butcher paper (to be used for walls/neighborhood buildings)
- Cardboard boxes (to be coal plants) + empty toilet paper roll/paper towel roll (to be a pipe "stack")
- Black + yellow legos (to represent uranium and coal)
- Large flat legos (to be used as solar panels)
- Strings
- Large + small tripod(s) (to be transmission and distribution lines)

Additional Materials

- Energy Systems [photos](#) and [captions](#) (print)
- Paper
- Markers
- Tape

Facilitation Steps

A. Introduction: Who are we? Who's all here? Goals for today [10 min]

B. Energy use at home [15 min]

1. Pass out paper and markers to all participants. Have them write: Morning, Afternoon, Evening, and Late Night in different corners of their paper.
2. Next, encourage them to draw or write the names of the common appliances they use throughout the day in their respective corners (e.g draw a tea kettle under "Morning" because I use my electric kettle for a cup of tea in the morning). Have them circle appliances they use multiple times throughout the day.
3. Explain that this activity is to help visualize the various energy sources they use throughout the day and get them thinking about their overall energy usage. Use leading questions:
 - a. What is used out of habit or comfort, but maybe isn't necessary?
 - b. What is used out of necessity?
 - c. How do appliances get the energy they need to work for us?
4. Briefly go around the room and have participants share their most commonly used appliance and how they believe their appliances get their energy to work.

C. Building our neighborhood [25 min]

1. Gather participants all together and explain that they will be working together to create their neighborhood (or city) using building blocks. Encourage them to include their homes, their neighborhood businesses, parks, roads, and even industrial areas.
2. Pass out building blocks, to be used for the structure of their neighborhood, and butcher paper, to be used for walls or buildings. Allow ~10 for conversing and building.
3. Once the neighborhood has been created, pass out paper and markers to all participants. Instruct them to draw or write the answers to the following questions on their paper:
 - a. Who lives in your neighborhood?
 - b. Who works in your neighborhood?
 - c. Who plays in your neighborhood?
 - d. Who learns in your neighborhood?
 - e. Who prays in your neighborhood?
4. Reflecting on those questions, discuss the various ways energy may be used in their neighborhood. Reference their personal energy use from the first activity and prompt them to consider: what a buildings energy use may be, what a parks energy use may be, what a schools energy use may be, etc.

D. Energy sources [25 min]

1. Have participants grab a chair and make a large group circle around their built neighborhood. Reference the various homes, streets, parks, buildings, etc. that participants built. Prompt participants to consider *where* the energy circulating our homes, streets, parks, buildings, etc. comes from. Allow ~2 minutes for pondering.
2. Ask participants to share their thoughts aloud with the large group, there is more than one

right answer. Once they are done sharing, begin going into further detail [using the photo captions as needed] and noting energy sources they may have missed. They will be building the energy sources into their neighborhood. Utilize the energy systems photos to visually describe each energy source to support with their building:

a. Power Plants

1. Coal fired power plants are facilities that burn coal to make steam in order to generate electricity.
2. Instruct participants to build a coal plant using cardboard boxes and empty toilet paper rolls.

ii. Using guiding questions, encourage participants to consider the impact power plants have on their communities and the environment:

1. Who lives nearby?
2. Who works there?
3. Who owns the plant?
4. Who owns the land it is on?
5. What pollutants are emitted using this process to generate electricity?

b. Transmission Lines

1. Transmission lines, which consist of heavy cables strung between tall towers, carry power from where it is generated to areas where it is needed.
2. Instruct participants to build transmission lines using tripods and strings.

c. Mining

1. Coal and uranium are extracted from the earth through underground mining or surface mining; to produce electricity, coal or uranium are transported to plants and are burned. The steam produced runs generators and turbines.
2. Instruct participants to build coal/uranium mines using cardboard boxes and filling them with black and yellow legos; instruct participants to also build a railroad track leading from the mine to the coal plant (built previously) with the legos trailing along the tracks.

ii. Using guiding questions, encourage participants to consider the impact mining may have on their communities and the environment:

1. Who lives nearby?
2. Who works there?
3. Who owns the mines?
4. Who owns the land it is on?
5. What impacts does mining have on the environment?

Impacts of the current energy system

This entire system is built to get energy to our neighborhoods and cities, but comes with negative impacts to people and the environment. What could a just energy future look like?

E. Collective visioning around energy systems [15 min]

1. In the group circle around the neighborhood, encourage participants to take a moment to look at everything and really internalize this big picture snapshot of our energy system. Note the ways that everything is connected – from the mines all the way to our homes when we go to flick a light on or to turn on our electric kettles. Prompt them to imagine the extreme effort and power it took to create this system.
2. Using guiding questions, facilitate a collective reflection referencing the built neighborhood and energy system:
 - a. How much money and/or power goes into this system?
 - b. Will this system be able to last forever?
 - c. What if we replace all coal plants with a wind farm?
 - i. Wind farms are considered to be renewable energy sources, because their sources are “infinite”.
 - ii. Would this option solve the pollution problems that may be coming from other sources? What problems are still present?
 - d. Is this energy system working for our communities?
 - e. What could make our community less dependent on this current complex energy system?
 - f. Could we commit to using less energy and consider renewable ways to generate electricity at our homes or in our neighborhoods?
 - i. Introduce the concept of community solar: Various solar power installations whose generated electricity is shared by a community. Community solar is a way of reclaiming energy systems by promoting cooperative ownership and community-based control of energy resources.
 - ii. Utilize the solar panels photo for a visual description.
 - iii. Solar panels convert sunlight into electrical energy either through photovoltaic (PV) panels or through mirrors that concentrate solar radiation. This energy can be used to generate electricity.
 - iv. Instruct participants to put flat legos down in yards, parks, schools, etc. to represent solar panels.

A renewable energy future

We can collectively shift the control of energy resources and decision-making from the

corporate energy infrastructure into cooperative control. Moments like this are the first step as we collectively envision ways to democratize the energy system and push for a just transition [from a fossil-fuel economy] to a renewable energy economy, grounded in the economic and social needs of our neighborhoods.

F. Reflections & Closing [10 min]

1. Wrap-up; what did participants learn? What will they be sharing with community members? What remains unanswered?
2. Thank participants for their time and participation; we hope that they learned something new and are energized to continue conversations like today's.

Appendix D: FFA: SAE Student Project Examples

Proficiency Descriptions:

Agricultural Mechanics Energy Systems (Ag. Power): involves the adjustments, repairs, and maintenance of agricultural power systems including mechanical power, electrical power, chemical power, wind power, solar power and/or water power.

Emerging Agricultural Technology: involves students gaining experiences in new and emerging agricultural technologies, such as agri-science, biotechnology lab research, computers and other new and emerging technologies.

Agricultural Communications: typically includes programs in which a student is placed at a newspaper or other agricultural print (such as magazines) facilities to obtain training and practical experience in writing and publicizing in preparation for a writing communications career. Programs may also be at radio, TV stations, fair media rooms, or other businesses requiring speaking skills and knowledge of agriculture. Also includes any use of technology (such as websites) aimed at communicating the story of agriculture.

Agricultural Education: for students with SAE's related to education and extension, including, but not limited to, youth mentoring, agricultural education departmental assistants, mentors and student coordinators, students developing and conducting informational materials and presentations for civic organizations and school aged youth, and students who are involved in SAEs surrounding educating the public about the broad topics of agriculture, agriculture education and the FFA.

Environmental Science and Natural Resources: typically results in FFA members receiving practical experiences concerned with the principles and practices of managing and/or improving the environment and natural resources. Activities may include management of agriculture waste, recycling of agriculture products, environmental clean-ups, conservation corps, agricultural energy usage, multiple uses of resources, land use regulations including soil, water and air quality, preservation of wetlands, shorelines and grasslands, wildlife surveys, erosion prevention practices, public relations and education concerning pollution.

Project Examples	Proficiency Award Area
Work for a local electrician in agricultural settings.	Agricultural Mechanics Energy Systems
Wire agricultural buildings for lights and receptacles.	Agricultural Mechanics Energy Systems
Conduct a field demonstration on GPS systems for elementary students.	Emerging Agricultural Technology or Agricultural Education
Construct prototypes of hydraulic systems.	Agricultural Mechanics Energy Systems
Interview area agriculture producers about the changes in technology over the past years.	Agricultural Communications
Create a digital video program.	Agricultural Communications
Research the energy use of different types of lighting systems in farm buildings.	Agricultural Mechanics Energy Systems
Research the effectiveness of habitat restoration projects in your community.	Environmental Science and Natural Resources

Other resources:

- [Minnesota FFA Association, Supervised Agricultural Experiences](#)
- [National FFA SAE for All Resources](#)
- [Minnesota FFA Association, Investigate SAE Ideas](#)
- [Jackson Electric: Cooperative Test Plot](#)
- [BCHS student participates in area wiring contest - The True Citizen](#)

Appendix E: Member Owner Survey Questions

Introduction to Survey:

Your insights and feedback will help inform the development of a community engagement framework that aligns with the priorities of the electric cooperative, its member-owners, community, workforce, and other stakeholders. The framework can be used for planned and future projects that GRE and stakeholders are investing in.

Participation in the survey is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. You may skip any question and/or stop taking the survey at any time.

The survey should take about 5-10 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your time and input.

Member-Owner Cooperative Name: (Drop-down of members)

Does your cooperative have any partnerships or interact with any of the following actor types? If so, please specify the partnerships you have:

- Utilities
- Community Groups
- Indigenous Communities
- Disadvantaged Communities
- Government
- NGOs

Are there any organizations in your service area that you would like to create partnerships with in the future?

Which actors or partnerships support cooperative project developments?

Which actors, if any, are likely to oppose the cooperative project developments?

During project development, what are your member and partner organizations' priorities regarding communication and engagement?

Are there any community engagement improvements you would like to see in the future?