

ISAC Excellence in Action Award 2022

Nomination type: PROGRAM

Name of Program: Linn + Johnson Grow Solar 2021

County: Johnson County and Linn County

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OVERVIEW AND BENEFITS TO THE PUBLIC

The Linn + Johnson Counties Grow Solar 2021 program planning, rollout and hosting took place from January to October 2021. The engaging program taught people throughout the two adjacent counties about solar energy and made it affordable for small homeowners and others to add clean energy arrays to their properties.

Nearly 450 people from both rural and urban areas learned about solar through free online Solar Power Hours, and 64 property owners added a total of 557 kW of clean solar power. The program was modeled and guided by the Midwest Renewable Energy Association, which at no cost helps communities host group buys. This was the first dual solar group buy for the two counties, each of which had previously hosted group buys on their own. The program engaged a locally based installer (Eagle Point Solar) thereby helping the local economy.

The solar group buy and education program launched with below market rate pricing. By reaching four milestones based on the group's collective purchasing amounts of 50, 150, 300 and 500 kW, participants received even more savings per watt. Any saving thresholds reached after property owners signed on for solar were retroactively rebated to them. The average system size purchased was nearly 9 kW, which should result in an average first-year utility savings of 10,300 kWh, equal to about \$776, for a homeowner.

Of the accomplishments ISAC values for this recognition program, we believe our program addresses these three criteria:

- Offer a new opportunity to county residents
- Promote intergovernmental cooperation and coordination in addressing shared problems.
- Provide a model from which other counties, officials, and/or affiliates may learn

Innovative and creative ways we offered the solar group buy and drew interest to the program:

- Using Zoom
- Partnering with the major city in each jurisdiction and nonprofits.
- Engaging with additional cities and organization, such as Farm Bureau of Linn County to the Cedar Rapids NAACP, that helped publicize and host the educational events.
- Participating in a Fourth of July parade with a bicycle-powered "float."

Leadership came from primary representatives from each county:

Johnson County Planning, Development and Sustainability (Sustainability Coordinator)

Johnson County Conservation (Conservation Program Manager)

Linn County Public Health (Air Quality Scientist + the Environmental Services Manager)

Linn County Board Office (Sustainability Manager)

The counties worked with the MREA and recruited and collaborated with the key partners of the City of Cedar Rapids, the City of Iowa City, Green Iowa AmeriCorps--Cedar Rapids/Matthew 25, Green Iowa AmeriCorps--Iowa City, Johnson Clean Energy District, Linn Clean Energy District, and The Nature Conservancy in Iowa. Additional nonprofits and membership groups were then engaged to further raise awareness. Johnson County and Linn County worked hard to bring in so many groups as relationship building was important not just for this project but in general for future collaboration.

Replication of this type of solar group buy among counties is very feasible. Others can follow the model by the partnering with the Midwest Renewable Energy Association or similar organization. Both counties helped MREA create materials that would make it easier for other communities to learn how to do a group buy and then to carry out the program. In addition, both counties have shared their experience and best practice tips directly with other communities in Iowa through stories, presentations and one-on-one consults.

Cost-savings and efficiency were two program hallmarks. The program efficiently used staff time. The budget for extra advertising was modest though largely covered by the MREA, and because we used social media, especially Facebook and Next Door, local outreach was very cost-effective. Both counties and associated cities and nonprofits used templates for communications or engaged with our communications departments to do outreach.

Cooperation and collaboration are absolutely necessary to facilitating a successful solar group buy. The counties engaged the extremely helpful primary cities and nonprofits listed in the leadership section. We were able to engage all the other cities to put information in their newsletters. Equally important, six additional service and volunteer groups ranging from the NAACP to the Farm Bureau to the Kirkwood Community College Sustainability Club helped publicize the events and provide introductions during the live presentations. All of the jurisdictions and organizations got to make new contacts and understand each other's constituency and goals better.

Perseverance was required of us due to two challenges from the start. First, the program was launched barely six months after the August 2020 derecho. We knew many residents, particularly in the Linn County and Cedar Rapids area, were struggling to have secure housing, and we wanted to be sensitive to that. At the same time, the brutal storm meant people were

replacing their roofs and many were also more determined to build resiliency into their home. Adding solar was a way to find a bit of silver lining in the unfortunate destruction of the storm.

Second, the program planning had to begin in early 2021 before the vaccine availability and course of COVID was fully known. We hoped for opportunities to offer in-person events but ultimately had to leverage all of our online Zoom presentation to engage people.

Disclosure note: Becky Soglin (Johnson County Sustainability Coordinator) on her own personal volunteer time has been an unpaid board member since 2020 with the Midwest Renewable Energy Association. That role had nothing direct to do with the solar group buy.

Images are included in the separate file, thank you.