

IREC Steering Committee Meeting

February 23, 2021

Present: Doc Bagley, Strafford; Elizabeth Ferry, Barnard; Erica Ko, Thetford; Geoff Martin, IREC; Neal Leitner, Woodstock; Ryan Haac, Sharon.

Additionally: Karen Thorkilsen, Barnard Energy Committee; Peter Gregory, TRORC.

1. **Additions/changes to agenda:**

Doc to give update on Window Dressers program at end of meeting.

2. **Evaluating the IREC Program**

Karen stated that she thinks the IREC program is an exciting pilot for the state of VT, and that it seems important to have an organized cadre of energy leaders helping to figure out how to implement the state's goals.

Elizabeth said that she has been relieved to find that the position is filling in gap and is not duplicative (i.e., adds to the work that energy committees and other organizations are playing).

Doc said that in Strafford, the position became a line item in the budget this year instead of vote on an article. He thinks it is helpful that the Selectboard, rather than the voters, made the decision to continue on with the position next year, since they will be more involved in the process. They are going to want to see results, which can be hard to achieve quickly, particularly for smaller towns.

Ryan noted that Sharon's Selectboard also moved the funding to a line item in the budget. He feels the move is an acknowledgement that there has been solid communication and progress has been made, and there is understanding that the position will not pay for itself immediately and there are other benefits aside from "payback".

Erica stated that it can be a challenge when people are so focused on payback, and wondered whether the IREC program should focus more on projects that will result in immediate savings, such as the fuel purchasing collaborative. Karen noted that part of this work should be to change mindsets – there needs to be a broader understanding of full-cost accounting. The group shouldn't give in to focusing narrowly on short-term savings – there is a real, substantial cost to business-as-usual.

Erica said that there should be greater emphasis on developing a clear and succinct explanation of the benefits of the program, with more focused messaging. Selectboards and citizens don't typically ask what the payback is for the Police Department, yet towns pay for these services because there is value beyond "savings". There should be a clear explanation of the value of the IREC program too. Doc noted that, unfortunately, energy topics (e.g., solar panels) typically get framed in terms of payback, though no one asks when a marble countertop will pay for itself!

Elizabeth mentioned that she has found that people tend to be concerned about payback before committing to something, but once they've decided to do it (e.g., sign on to the IREC program), they become less concerned. Perhaps because they are satisfied with the progress being made.

Geoff asked what the committee thought about having an evaluation process, and who should be involved. Neal thought that an evaluation of the program should involve the Selectboards. Doc said that one year is a good point to have the evaluation. Only 6 months into the program and still in the process of collecting information. The true action items are starting to come into place, so we will have a better sense of the impact at the anniversary date.

Erica agreed with Doc that the evaluation should happen no sooner than the one-year mark. She noted that the Steering Committee should discuss the evaluation process at future meetings. She asked if there might be a benefit for Geoff to have a more public facing role – perhaps through regularly scheduled updates at Selectboard meetings.

Peter provided a summary of the conversation to this point. He noted the struggle between demonstrating short term gains versus keeping the long-term picture in mind. He told the committee that this issue is something that is often discussed by TRORC staff and the Executive Committee, and recognized that managing this tension well is what will make this program a success. He stated that Selectboards make funding decisions and have different perspectives, so it is important to identify quick wins. Peter assured the committee that he is focused on the bigger picture of achieving the region's/state's energy mandates – he can be strong in his advocacy and has Board support in doing this. He mentioned that a couple of RPCs are watching what TRORC is doing very carefully. Peter wants to provide a good summary of the IREC program and how it's been received by the 6 towns and the Board to RPCs and the legislature. The state has invested a lot of money into energy planning, and they want to ensure that there is implementation. Finally, Peter noted that regular evaluation is key, and that input from the IREC Steering Committee and Selectboards is as important as Peter's.

3. IREC and Schools

Geoff noted that schools are the largest single item in municipal budgets and the biggest municipal consumer of energy. He has started talking with select boards and schools. Of particular note

Thetford: superintendent is excited. Interest may move ahead.

Sharon: Ryan talked with the Superintendent of the White River Valley Supervisory Union. They are interested in energy efficiency and solar, but it gets complicated because Sharon is only one of several towns in the White River Valley Supervisory Union; the majority of other towns are not involved with IREC.

Peter Gregory pointed out that some of the IREC funding comes from sources beyond the six participating towns, and that some of this money could be used to support Geoff's time on this topic. Geoff will move ahead and learn more.

4. Solar Update

Doc and Geoff have visited potential Strafford sites offered by interested landowners. It is likely that one, and maybe two or three, will move ahead.

Thetford: is looking in to expanding their school array with Norwich Technologies.

Woodstock: has greater capacity to use solar than previously calculated. New EMS building roof presents opportunities.

Note: We want to understand the RECs issue in the early stages of developing plans for our towns. Geoff will invite an expert to our next meeting.

5. Window Dresser Program

Doc reported that in 2019, Thetford and Strafford energy committees partnered on this. About 250 reusable, framed plastic window-inserts were made by volunteers and homeowners. Doc is in conversation now with Laura Seton, ex. dir., about possible plans for post-Covid/2022. Related equipment is in storage in N. Thetford and there are plans to make 150 inserts for the elementary school. Doc and Erica recommend the program: weatherization benefits, builds community and neighborly connection. Very easy "entrance" to the program; no forms, wait lists, etc..

Questions:

Some claims on website seem overly optimistic about energy savings. Response: maybe, yes.

EVT explicitly points people away from windows and towards attic and basement insulation. What's our message to the public? How do Window Dressers compare, for example, to COVER Home Repair offerings? Response: the inserts are reusable, last more than one season if stored safely.

6. Next Meetings:

We'll meet again in March.

Geoff will continue to schedule 1:1 meetings.