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Sol Not Coal: Leveraging Solar Energy to Strengthen Community-Based Nonprofit Organizations

Project Summary

Part I. Description

Participating organizations

- Zona Del Sol - Southside Santa Fe, New Mexico
- Tewa Women United - Espanola, New Mexico

Background or problem statement

Currently 60% of our energy needs in NM are met by the combustion of coal, with adverse effects on our economy, environment and health. By reducing energy consumption and replacing fossil fuels with renewable alternatives, we take an essential step toward a healthy and resilient community. Beyond the immediate benefits of reducing utility costs, long-term improvements include a reduction of carbon emissions and other toxic pollution, water conservation, and improved public health. It is critical that the economic, environmental, and community empowerment benefits of the clean energy economy be available to traditionally underserved communities. By solarizing the Tewa Women United's community center and allowing the organization to repurpose funds previously spent on electricity bills into family wellness, environmental justice, and cultural revitalization programming, this project brings the benefit of solar to the northern Pueblos of New Mexico and is a critical step toward energy democracy and climate justice. In 2014, this project brought the benefits of solar to the Southside of Santa Fe – at the Zona Del Sol Youth and Families Center. Working with young leaders in high school who helped drive the project, the Zona Del Sol solarization raised awareness about the importance of making renewable energy and green technology accessible to working families.

General description of the project

Funding for Sol Not Coal made possible the solarization of two critical community buildings and the education of hundreds of diverse community members about the benefits of solar. We successfully installed a Sol Not Coal 4,152 kWh solar electric system at the Zona Del Sol southside youth and community center in April of 2014. The Community center houses positive youth development, environmental education, and food access & healthy living programming for predominantly Latino and low-income community members on the underserved southside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. We successfully installed a Sol Not Coal solar electric system at Tewa Women United that produces 800kWh/per month of electricity, save approximately 100% on electric utility bills, conserve approximately 60,000 gallons of water not used in power plant steam turbines, and eliminate more than 200,000 pounds of carbon pollution that would have otherwise been released in the atmosphere by fossil fuel-based electricity generation.

Description of outcomes and follow-up

The project successfully achieved two community center solarizations benefitting youth and working families on the Southside of Santa Fe and tribal communities in northern New Mexico. Each of the projects followed our proven model for Sol Not Coal community solarizations including consultation with stakeholders and appropriate community leadership; training for center staff on energy efficiency and the benefits of renewable energy; the installation of the systems themselves as well as real-time meters that track carbon mitigation, water savings, and renewable energy kilo-watt hours produced and highly visible signage and information about the system to educate service recipients; community-wide solar celebrations upon the completion of the project in order to engage the wider community and amplify the benefits of the project, and educational tools to integrate into programming about the benefits of renewable energy; opportunities for beneficiaries to participate as authentic advocates in the advancement of renewable energy policy campaigns.

Project Summary

Part II. Analysis

Successes

As described above - the greatest successes were the completion of the projects and the solar celebrations - and the transformation that beneficiaries underwent that led to them participating in renewable energy advocacy opportunities - where they shared their stories.

Challenges

As described above, the only real challenge that arose throughout the implementation of these two solarizations was the extremely long delay in the purchase of the Tewa Women United building.

Lessons Learned

These two partnerships have yielded extremely illuminating exchanges with young people and elders about solar energy. What is fascinating is that on both ends of the age spectrum, community members were enthusiastic believers in and advocates for the benefits of solar. The young people we worked with at Earth Care have seen the enormous impact of new technologies in their lives. The idea of solar power is easy for their generation to comprehend. Meanwhile, the elders in the Native community have memories of much simpler technological times – but their understanding of the sun’s life affirming power is deeply engrained from their land-based agricultural traditions. Further, the need to move away from fossil-fuel based energy is deeply felt by all.

Among the communities impacted by these projects, support for solar energy was overwhelming. Yet the road to transition is what the community members found daunting and prohibitive. The obstacles to solar energy are structural and largely, at this point, artificially sustained by conventional energy investors and architects working actively to block renewable energy deployment. We were very happy to find that the training we provided as well as the direct EXPERIENCE with solar energy not only affirmed participants’ interest and belief in solar as a solution – but increased their believe that they could help change the system as a whole and make solar more accessible to the rest of their community.

What Next? What will you do and what should others do?

We look forward to building on the success of this project with additional Sol Not Coal solarizations, particularly in partnership with Native communities. Next up will be Cochiti Pueblo which has not only signed the Partnership Agreement to solarize the Hahn Center but whose Council in so doing, expressed interest in solarizing the entire Pueblo. This is a very exciting partnership. Tribal leadership in renewable energy has such a strong cultural basis and has a great deal of potential. Given the history of environmental racism in our country and the disproportionate impact of fossil fuel and nuclear extraction on Native communities, the investment in Native-led renewable energy development is especially important. We welcome suggestions for partnerships and funding opportunities in this area.

We are happy to share our successful Sol Not Coal model including crowd-funding and Dine to Donate grassroots fundraising tools to help other communities deploy solar in support of community organizations and service-agencies.

For more information about the project please contact:

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