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Participatory Processes for Renewable Energy Projects

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The following is an excerpt from a University of Michigan *Dow Sustainability Fellows* project, *Beyond Renewable: Incorporating social sustainability & community benefits into renewable energy projects*, advised by Dr. Sarah Mills and Dan Worth (Traverse City Groundwork Center).

PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

For renewable energy projects, research shows that strong community engagement and clear public benefits lead to more favorable public perception and greater buy-in by the community.¹ **Participatory processes** are the strategies used to engage the community, increase public knowledge, and gain buy-in for renewable energy projects.

As with any capital development project, the municipality and the developer together choose how much (if at all) to engage the community in the development and decision-making processes related to renewable energy developments. The greater the engagement, the higher the project’s likelihood of success.

Successful participatory processes share the following characteristics:

- They are very transparent.
- They offer opportunities for engagement before, during, and after development.
- They carefully and widely publicize community benefits associated with development.

There are three major categories of participatory processes:

1. Social license to operate
2. Community consultation
3. Formal contracts

These processes range from least to most intensive in terms of participation and engagement. These categories listed above are intended to simplify the range of options; in reality, each category encompasses a range of potential participatory processes.

In any renewable energy development, the participatory process should include, at minimum, opportunities for community consultation. This approach ensures adequate community and stakeholder input and positive engagement, and allows the city and the developer (who are more knowledgeable regarding project details and financing) to make final decisions based on community input.



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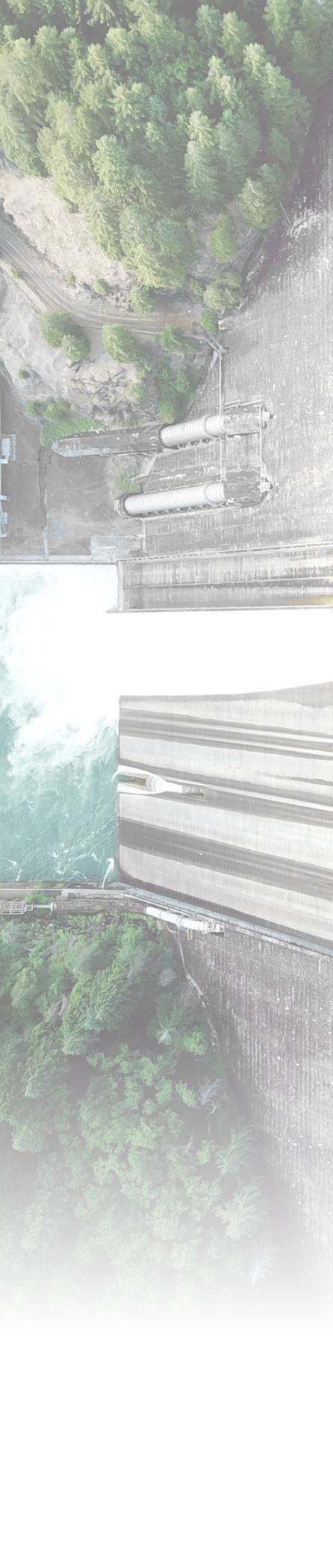


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The *Clean Energy in Michigan* series provides case studies and fact sheets answering common questions about clean energy projects in Michigan.

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



CREATING A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

1. Identify all relevant project stakeholders.
 - a. Who must you engage for project success? Who else should or could you engage? Consider community groups, landowners, utilities, the developer, local government officials, and more.
2. Create a stakeholder committee.
 - a. The committee should have at least one representative from each stakeholder group.
 - b. Set expectations for committee members around their responsibilities by answering questions like the following.
 - i. At what points in the process will the committee provide input?
 - ii. What is the committee's level of control over decisions related to community benefits? Are they deciders, recommenders, or a focus group?
 - iii. Is the committee expected to create proposals for community benefits or to respond to proposals from the city/developer?
 - iv. Does the committee have a say in the amount of funding dedicated to community benefits?
 - v. Will the committee consider the scale (\$ value, % of project revenue, etc.) of community benefits in addition to the use of these funds?
 - vi. Will the committee engage in issues beyond community benefits for this project? If so, explain the expected issues and level of involvement.
 - c. Create a regular meeting schedule and timeline for committee involvement.
3. Create opportunities for broader community involvement at key decision points.
 - a. For example, hold a community meeting to explain the current proposal and ask for community input.
 - b. Ensure these opportunities are well-publicized and accessible for all stakeholder groups.
 - c. Consider allowing the broader community, or the stakeholder committee, to select their preferred community benefits from a slate of options that make financial sense for the city and the developer.
4. Publicize community benefits.
 - a. Research shows that communities that well-publicize these benefits have higher rates of community support for renewables developments.

Citations

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- 1 Mills S. (2018) Wind Energy and Rural Community Sustainability. In: Leal Filho W., Marans R., Callewaert J. (eds) Handbook of Sustainability and Social Science Research. World Sustainability Series. Springer, Cham