

Keene's Path to Community Power in New Hampshire

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Community Power, also known as municipal electricity aggregation, is an emerging opportunity for New Hampshire cities and towns to negotiate lower electricity rates and cleaner energy on behalf of their communities. Community Power offers an alternative to the utility default supply service, and is frequently undertaken to reduce electricity costs, offer a stable rate, provide a responsible alternative to third party supply options, and increase renewable energy in the electricity supply.

On May 6, the Keene City Council voted unanimously to adopt the first Community Power Plan in the state, a process that took only 11 months to complete. Keene was followed closely by the Town of Harrisville, which adopted a Community Power Plan at their Town Meeting on May 22. In addition, several other communities in the state are currently at various stages in the process of developing a Community Power program.

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Keene City Manager Elizabeth Dragon and Bob Hayden, President of Standard Power, deliver the City of Keene Community Power Plan to the Public Utilities Commission on May 11, 2021. The plan was formally adopted by the City Council on May 6, 2021. Photo credit: Ryan Polson, Standard Power.

In a Community Power program, a municipality pools the demand of its residents and small businesses, creating substantial buying power that it can leverage to purchase electricity at a competitive rate while meeting local goals, such as increasing local renewable energy, supporting energy efficiency, and/or providing greater price stability. Customers are provided more supply choices in the program, but the utility continues to deliver the electricity, maintain the poles and wires, and handle all electricity billing. Only the supply rate on the customer bill changes.

Participation in the program is voluntary. All residents and businesses within a municipality are eligible to participate in the program, but have no obligation to do so. Before the program launches, customers on default supply with the utility are given the opportunity to opt out. Once the program is running, customers can change products and leave or join the program at any time, without fees or penalties.

Community Power is a form of municipal aggregation, with programs active in other states for years. The common thread among municipalities that run these programs is local control - over where the electricity comes from, how much the community pays for its electricity supply, and other terms such as the length of the supply contract and net metering incentives. These programs are popular and growing in communities with an interest in providing more renewable energy options, including cities like Keene with a goal to transition to 100% renewable energy.

Keene's experience developing its Community Power program can provide a path for other communities to get started.

Keene first identified Community Power as a valuable opportunity in late 2019, shortly after it was enabled in New Hampshire by SB 286. The City had already adopted a goal to transition to 100% renewable electricity by 2030, and it was evaluating all options for implementation. After review, it became clear that offering a Community Power program was the single most impactful action to make progress community-wide.

Forming a Community Power Committee

The first formal step in starting a Community Power program is for the City Council or Select Board to appoint a Community Power Committee (also sometimes called an electric aggregation committee.) Committee members can be an existing energy committee or a mix of business and residential constituents with an interest in energy issues. The Committee is responsible for developing and approving a Community Power plan, which it then presents to the City Council or Town meeting for adoption.

In Keene, the Mayor and City Council appointed an ad-hoc Community Power Committee (CPC) of six members, and had staff representation from the city's Community Development department. The CPC first met in July of 2020 and quickly decided that it needed more information about Community Power and how it has been implemented in other communities. Municipalities often simply engage a trusted vendor for energy services, but given the lack of community power programs and service providers in New Hampshire at the time, Keene chose an RFP process to attract and select a Community Power consultant.

Engaging Experts

Community Power consultants can provide their expertise, staff time and services for no charge, amplifying the volunteer Community Power Committee's capabilities.

Keene hired a full-service consulting team that would provide support through all stages of a Community Power program, from community outreach and developing a plan, to negotiating for electricity supply, and launching and maintaining a program. This approach allowed the city to act quickly and without any upfront risk or costs. Keene's process encouraged the partnership of two experienced energy consulting firms, Good Energy, with a track record of delivering municipal aggregation programs in New England, and Standard Power, with local New Hampshire municipal energy clients.

Keene signed a letter of engagement with its consulting team, which works at its own risk and is paid a fee embedded in the price of power, agreed upon at the outset. This arrangement has advantages for the community and is common in municipal aggregation programs around the country for municipalities of all sizes, and especially those with little or no dedicated resources or staff, because the community is never under any obligation to launch a Community Power program or continue with the consultants.

Gathering Input and Establishing Community Goals

A Community Power plan should always start with community goals, which can be gleaned from a master plan, an energy plan, public hearings, surveys, and community conversations. Public input on the plan is not only a requirement of the Community Power law (NH RSA 53-E), its also a best practice and a measure of a program's success. Listening early to all community members is important to craft a plan that reflects the wants and needs of the entire community, and not just a portion of it. At a minimum, the law requires a CPC to hold public hearings on the plan.



Outreach materials are placed to encourage public input at every stage of the planning process. Good Energy & Standard Power 2021.

Why is community input so important? In New Hampshire, electricity customers can return to the utility's default supply at any time, whether they are part of a Community Power program or getting their electricity supply from a third-party competitive supplier. A Community Power program's success relies on high participation and the popularity of the program choices throughout the community.

Keene had recently completed an energy planning process, so the CPC started with a clearly defined overarching goal to achieve 100% renewable energy by 2030. Within this context, the CPC and City set out to gather community input for the design of the Community Power program.

The CPC, City staff and consulting team utilized a variety of outreach methods to reach different groups in the community over four months through March 2021. These methods included holding live information sessions (four total), conducting a survey (online and hard copies), doing radio interviews, sending out press releases, presenting to various community groups, and developing emails and social media content including two short educational videos.

The survey responses and information session comments highlighted a desire for the Community Power program to support local renewable energy generation, equity, energy efficiency, job creation, and climate resilience and preparedness, and highlighted the need for program choices, to meet the goals of community members. Using this feedback, the consulting team developed a first draft of a Community Power plan, which then went through multiple rounds of edits based on comments from the CPC, City staff and additional public input.

Based on the draft and public input, Keene developed a plan based on five principles outlined in the vision statement.



Community Power vision statement.

These five principles translate into the following broad actions:

- The default product will provide cleaner electricity while remaining cost competitive, and Keene will focus on sourcing the renewable electricity as close to the City as possible;
- Optional products will be offered to provide more customer choices in addition to the default product, for those that want a choice of maximum cost savings and more renewable energy, up to 100%;
- The city is committed to on-going public engagement, to inform new offerings and innovations that support cleaner energy;
- Keene will advocate for laws and regulation to expand opportunities for the program; and
- Keene may participate in a buying group to encourage and collaborate with other cities and towns.

Approval and Adoption of the Plan

After the public hearings, the Community Power Committee votes to approve the plan. Once approved, the plan then goes to the governing body of the municipality for adoption.

Like other New Hampshire cities, Keene's governing body is City Council, allowing it to bring its approved plan to the governing body as soon as the plan was ready in May. Towns must look to their annual Town Meeting for final plan adoption. Either way, getting started with a Community Power Committee this summer or fall would put a community on pace to have a plan ready next spring and in time for Town Meeting, if applicable, and a program launch as early as late spring/summer 2022.

The Keene CPC held two public hearings prior to voting to approve its plan. Once approved by the CPC, the plan was sent to the City Council, where it was formally adopted on May 6, 2021 by unanimous vote.

Next Steps and Regulatory Update

Following local approval, a Community Power plan goes to the Public Utilities Commission for approval, however the PUC is not yet ready to review Community Power plans. First, HB 315 as amended needs to be signed into law, and then the PUC must finalize its rules for Community Power. HB 315 as amended has received significant input and support from a broad range of stakeholders including communities, utilities and the governor, so passage is anticipated. HB 315 is also comprehensive, so the remaining rules required by the PUC are limited and known, for example rules governing the release of account-level data to the Community Power program. If HB 315 as amended becomes law, the PUC will have up to 60 days to review a plan for compliance with state law.

HB 315 and Community Power rules have a good chance of being in place by the end of this year or early 2022, and Keene will be ready to launch its Community Power program as soon as PUC rules allow it to do so, in late 2021 or 2022. For towns with a town meeting, planning to vote on a Community Power plan in the spring of 2022 would be timely to launch a program in 2022 or early 2023.

First Steps with Consulting Team Standard Power & Good Energy

Communities have differing goals, and Community Power plans should be tailored to meet those goals. Consulting team Standard Power & Good Energy are a full service, experienced, customer focused community power consulting team. Standard Power serves over 65 towns and school districts in New Hampshire for their energy supply needs including renewable energy through group net metering and direct consulting services. Good Energy provides community power services to hundreds of cities and towns looking for better choices, lower costs and clean energy solutions. Together the team brings a wealth of experience to municipalities bringing Community Power to their communities, whether they are cities with 100% renewable electricity goals, tiny towns, and everything in between.



Good Energy and Standard Power are forming a May 2022 buying group of towns that want to follow Keene's streamlined path to Community Power. Please call or email Emily Manns at (603) 831-3817 or e.manns@standardpower.com for more information on how your City or Town can join.

In addition to working with Standard Power and the consulting team, Emily Manns is the chair of the Peterborough Energy Committee and a leader in the corporate responsibility team of climate action group Mothers Out Front, working to bring accountability and transparency to the clean energy transition.

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