

# Insights Report

Guidance for Washington's Clean Energy Future  
from Community-Based Solar Developers



Updated February 2022



Spark Northwest has partnered with over twenty organizations to plan, fund and install clean energy projects based in BIPOC and low-wealth communities. We reached out to these changemakers to learn more about what clean energy projects mean to their communities, and what's next. Here's what they had to say...

## 1. Capacity building support is crucial.

Organizations are struggling to help their communities manage and fight the impacts of environmental injustice. Sometimes this means that planning capital investments and improvements, such as energy efficiency and renewable energy, take a backseat to urgent needs for utility service, debt relief, food assistance, employment, family and health care. But this doesn't mean that organizations don't care about clean energy.

Developing energy projects is simply not possible without consistent support on a flexible timeline. Clean energy grants and incentives often rely on recipients to develop projects, raise match funding and community buy-in, tie in workforce development, provide solar education, complete reporting, and manage PR promotions. And yet, grants often only cover capital costs.

Providing technical assistance is not a one-way street. It requires developing trust, supporting mutual mentorship, participating in advocacy, and creating opportunities for visioning. Technical assistance is only as durable as the relationships involved.

### Technical Assistance

- Co-design a scope of work.
- Discuss next steps.
- Follow up research.
- Take initiative to reach out with reminders and information.
- Track tasks.
- Draft reports, presentations, application materials.
- Reach out to decision makers.
- Review prior decisions.
- Get a foot in the door with funders, utilities, agencies.
- Support contractor estimates and selection.

***“Most people give me forms to fill out. It's been helpful that you generate something I can actually use for grant applications, quantifying the data we need, and coming up with a roadmap... And understanding that we sometimes just disappear.”***

*- Dale Andert, Lummi Indian Business Council on working with Spark Northwest.*

## 2. Slow your roll.

Planning projects takes time, and so does consensus building. Although funders frequently express readiness for more shovel-ready projects, community buy-in is a critical ingredient for success. Alignment with the community's vision is the intangible gem that makes clean energy projects meaningful and ultimately useful. For example, taking the time to plan can be the difference between a solar project that offsets some energy use, and a solar+storage project that offsets energy use and additionally offers resilience during sustained power outages.

***“Setting expectations at the outset is important. It is not uncommon for construction delays or complexities to occur. It is helpful to have long term partners that can withstand a flexible timeline.”***

*- Alejandra Tapia, Yakima Valley Partners  
Habitat for Humanity*



### 3. Funders must be transparent and accountable.

Philanthropy can play an important role in community-led energy projects, but must avoid greenwashing and other unaccountable practices. Community-based organizations and leaders can cite many examples of being exploited, eclipsed or tokenized, or of unknowingly perpetuating the perception that wealthy white people are charitable saviors of Black and brown communities. Corporate and individual philanthropists should choose solidarity over charity by developing mutually transparent and accountable relationships.

***“In many ways, resources from those large corporations is wealth that was generated from our community. It makes sense to invest that back.”***

- Miguel Maestas, *El Centro de la Raza*

#### Here are a few common pitfalls we see:

Grants are framed as charitable contributions to the poor or needy, rather than recognizing the wisdom and power that resides in BIPOC communities. As a result, leaders of color and/or their organizations are not acknowledged for their investment of time and labor in project development.

Many grantmakers do not spend time on targeted outreach or allow sufficient application windows, resulting in an applicant pool of only highly-resourced groups.

Industry-specific technical terms can blur funding requirements. For example, it is important that utility grant managers are clear upfront on what Renewable Energy Credits are, how they are priced, who pays for them and what a purchase will entail.

It is not uncommon that applicants to grants spend months planning their project, cultivating buy-in, compiling requested documents, and coordinating with contractors, only to be declined. A transparent and accountable grant program would provide a clear opportunity for applicants to:

- 1) learn if their proposal is aligned with grant criteria before committing extensive resources,
- 2) receive technical support during the application process, and
- 3) hear constructive feedback on how the application could be strengthened to receive future funding.

## 4. Seeing is believing.

Clean energy projects have value beyond their immediate impact of generating affordable energy. Solar projects in Black and brown communities demonstrate that clean energy technologies belong to the people, and they spark ideas about what is possible. Representation and leadership of solar developers and planners of color are similarly important. It helps to dispel the notion that renewable energy is largely created by and for white people with wealth.

**“Black and brown people have always cared about the environment and giving back to the community... when people in the neighborhood see solar panels, they start conversations, and start pursuing their own goals for solar.”**

- *Shawna Hawk, Media Island*

For students at Highline High School, clean energy advocacy unlocked the door to broader community power. As they pursued solar for their school, they learned how local government functions, where to find clean energy jobs, the role that nonprofits have in communities, how to navigate city budgets, the impact of inclusive contracting, and the value of professional networking. These lessons opened their eyes to new ways to build resources for their community.

## 5. Avoid solutions that incur debt.

Communities of color and low-wealth communities are too often the target of predatory lending programs or have experienced detrimental impacts of institutional bias and exclusion in the financial sector. This is the backdrop against which community organizations consider any capital investments. Most want to avoid debt, which has been so toxic and costly in the past.

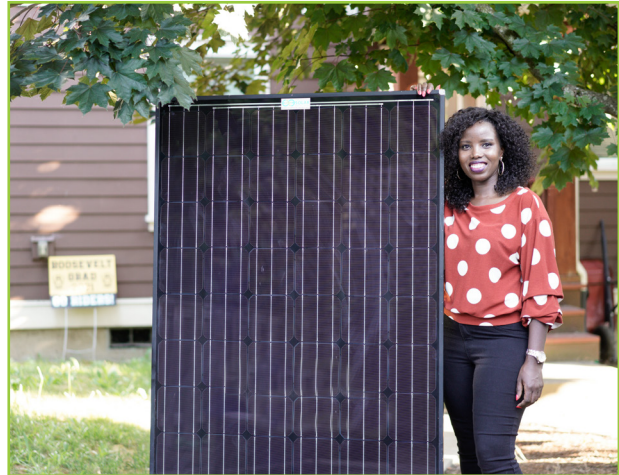
Organizations seek partners that share the goal of building intergenerational wealth for economic justice. They also seek partners who can share or assume risks and liabilities of developing capital investments at a fair cost. Communities of color and low-wealth communities deserve the prospect of savings but they rarely have the buffer to take on the risk of debt.

## 6. Power dynamics are real.

Institutional and cultural bias in the environmental and energy sector is pervasive, resulting in excluding and undervaluing Black, Indigenous and people of color leaders and organizations, and reciprocal mistrust. For example, getting a referral to the correct point of contact or hearing information about upcoming grants requires institutional knowledge, privilege, relationships and language that insiders take for granted. Energy jargon acts like an entry code, including some and excluding others from the information necessary to develop and fund clean energy projects.

Funders, agencies, consultants and other energy institutions must be proactive about tackling power dynamics in a direct, constructive way, and making materials informative and reader-friendly. For example, it can take a community-based organization weeks or months to find the right contact at utilities, understand what their role and decision-making abilities are, and build a common understanding. The opacity of such large institutions, and the obfuscation of rules and roles, make it challenging to understand, let alone influence, programs.


All institutions, not only utilities, should be clear about their motivations and funders, so that folks understand where they are coming from and what their role is. In supporting community organizations, advocates and partners can play a key role in encouraging grant makers, funders or other gatekeepers to make their process more accessible and responsive.



## 7. We need a broad and inclusive equitable clean energy policy.

Agencies have an obligation to make clean energy easy and affordable for the communities that need it most. This includes support for efficiency, weatherization, repair, maintenance, and healthy, affordable housing. Each region has specific needs and barriers, sometimes linguistic or cultural, that must be reflected in these programs and policies. Agencies are responsible for designing programs to meet human needs and therefore learning directly from community members about their needs.

Clean energy programs should likewise have clear outcomes that recognize the various benefits of solar projects. “Benefits” can mean bill savings, renewable energy credits, ownership, management, decision making, credibility/marketing, and more. By taking these benefits into account, policies and programs can be shaped in ways that look beyond the immediate impacts of clean energy and towards long term goals of equitable distribution of power and wealth in the energy system.



***“Clean air... It’s not a privilege, it’s a right!”***  
- Angela Ying, Bethany UCC

## 8. Clean energy isn’t partisan.

Western Washington sees higher rates of solar adoption than the rest of Washington, despite having less solar resources. Partly to blame is that clean energy is perceived as a partisan issue, not a human issue. The result is self-perpetuating, with fewer resources, outreach and support available in politically conservative areas. It is up to agencies and advocates to use language that resonates across different points of view. Doing so will ensure adoption of clean energy across the political spectrum, which is a crucial piece of making an equitable transition to clean energy.

***“Energy is survival. It is crucial in remote rural areas, especially in times of crisis, and in the context of COVID. Air quality and water are huge issues in agricultural and rural areas.”***

- Rosalinda Guillen, Community 2  
Community Development

## 9. Clean energy installations are only the beginning.

Redistributing wealth requires reorienting our entire economy to provide sustainable livelihoods to everyone. Redistributing power requires building democratic participation into every level of governance. Community-led and community-owned clean energy projects are only one piece of this puzzle; to do more than fix symptoms, we must reorient our economy and our self-governance to create enduring solutions.

Clean energy projects are an opportunity to address the denial of resources and political power, not only for resilience but survival. To live up to this potential, capacity building, for example educational workshops, presentations, and networking support, must be part of project planning.

## 10. Let's collaborate.

Planning projects is a learning journey and folks are interested to learn from one another and to visit one another's projects and community centers. Not only projects, but the people who have planned and implemented projects are also community assets. Events and informal opportunities to share skills and network across organizations help to spread information and resources.

Solar projects are meaningful to individual host organizations, but it's important that these benefits translate to more systemic redistribution of wealth and power through clean energy policy, projects and industry. Collaboration is a key part of this process.



## ***Community Based Solar Developers interviewed in this report:***

**Dale Andert**, Lummi Indian Business Council  
**Stephanie Bostwick**, Northwest Indian College  
**Miguel Maestas**, El Centro de la Raza  
**Angela Ying**, Bethany UCC  
**Cindy and Keith Ervin**, Green Buildings Now  
**Marsha Batie-Hopkins**, Sedonia Young, Shiloh Baptist Church of Tacoma  
**Nha Khuc, Ruth Assefa, Kim Nguyen, Selena Nguyen**, Highline High School  
**Gustavo Carvajal**, Dynamic Solar  
**Alex Tapia**, Yakima Valley Partners Habitat for Humanity  
**Shawna Hawk**, Media Island International  
**Laura Armstrong**, La Casa Hogar  
**Rosalinda Guillen**, Community 2 Community Development

# ***THANK YOU!***

***May we add your experiences and insights?***

Please contact [mikhaila@sparknorthwest.org](mailto:mikhaila@sparknorthwest.org) or 206-267-2213.

## **Access Solar Consultations from 2019 - 2021**

Organizations in Consultation	25
Grant Proposals Supported	47
Value of Grant Applications	\$6.1M
Grants Awarded	30
Value of Grant Awards	\$2.9M
Solar Installations	29 Completed, 5 In Progress