**Headline:** How Grassroots Energy Projects Are Taking Back Power From Utility Companies

**Teaser:** From solar power that cuts NYC energy bills and powers streetlights in Detroit to affordable high-speed internet throughout the United States, grassroots utilities projects are delivering on their promises to underserved communities of color.

By Aric Sleeper

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**[Article Body:]**

As power outages [caused](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/10/24/climate-change-power-outages/) by extreme weather events become more intense and frequent, the efforts by federal, state and local legislators to abate human-caused climate change may seem futile to those on the front lines, who are left sweating or freezing in their homes after the power goes out unexpectedly and at the worst time possible.

Without intervention, these events will only become more recurrent. According to data [provided](https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/) by the National Centers for Environmental Information—[which](https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/) is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and maintains and provides national geophysical data and information—there was an average of around three “weather and climate disasters” per year in the 1980s, compared to a staggering 22 extreme weather events in 2020.

The Biden administration’s participation in COP26, which took place in Glasgow from October 31 to November 13, 2021, was a step in the right direction to address climate change, compared to the previous administration, which [derailed](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/most-consequential-impact-of-trumps-climate-policies-wasted-time?loggedin=true) any progress made by the U.S. to address the current climate crisis. President Joe Biden, however, still did not go far enough at the international climate conference in terms of addressing environmental justice, systemic environmental racism and the disproportionate support for repairing the damage caused by extreme weather events in impoverished countries and underserved communities in the United States. The actions and projects needed to address these issues and bring about real change on the ground are, meanwhile, being championed by grassroots organizations led by women and people of color who are taking steps within their communities to move away from fossil fuels, power their neighborhoods with clean energy, and stay connected with community-created broadband infrastructure.

**In New York City, Making Solar Power Affordable and Accessible Is About ‘More Than Just Putting Panels on Rooftops’**

Working at the intersection of climate change and environmental justice in the heart of New York City is the Latino community-based nonprofit [UPROSE](https://www.uprose.org/mission). Founded in 1966, and based in the city’s largest maritime industrial district, the nonprofit organizes sustainable development projects and advocates for policies in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Sunset Park and throughout all five boroughs. Their [Sunset Park Solar](https://www.uprose.org/sunset-park-solar) project, which [“will be New York City’s first community solar project owned and operated by a cooperative for the benefit of local residents and businesses,”](https://sunsetparksolar.org/community-solar/) will save its participants about 15 percent on their monthly electric bill, once the solar system has been [installed](https://sunsetparksolar.org/community-solar/) and is operational.

The road to the project’s completion has been long and [challenging](https://www.thecity.nyc/environment/2021/10/4/22709913/nyc-solar-energy-projects-at-risk-as-state-credits-fade) due to the slow-moving gears of the existing governmental processes, according to Summer Sandoval, energy democracy coordinator at UPROSE.

“Sunset Park Solar is about more than just putting panels on rooftops; it’s about creating a scalable and replicable community-led model for the development of solar projects that build long-term community wealth and exhibit a [Just Transition](https://climatejusticealliance.org/members-of-the-alliance/),” Sandoval says. “This project builds on the traditional community solar model but is vastly different from anything that’s been done before, and it’s challenging to navigate our way through processes, financial models and incentive programs that weren’t built for projects like this.”

Sunset Park Solar would allow for about 200 subscribers to utilize renewable energy and would not require any of them to install solar panels on their homes or pay any upfront costs, as UPROSE and its partners in the project have already done the heavy lifting. The panels for this project will be [installed](https://www.uprose.org/energy) on the Brooklyn Army Terminal rooftop and will provide 685 kilowatts of clean electricity. In addition to the tangible cost-saving benefits to residents, the project has shown that community-led clean energy projects are possible.

“Even before construction, this project has demonstrated that the climate solutions are coming from the people on the front lines, and hopefully decision-makers see that as well and invest their resources directly into those front-line communities,” says Sandoval.

**A Bright Spot in Detroit With Solar Streetlights**

In Highland Park, Michigan, a city that sits within the City of Detroit, the nonprofit [Soulardarity](https://www.soulardarity.com/soulardarity_story) has been fighting for energy democracy since [2012](https://www.soulardarity.com/how_did_soulardarity_get_started).

“The idea of energy democracy is essentially focused on ensuring that the people who are affected the most by the decisions in energy should be the ones with the greatest amount of say in the process,” says Soulardarity Program Director Rafael Mojica.

Energy costs for city residents have been skyrocketing for [decades](https://www.soulardarity.com/settlement_statement) (and [continue](https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2019/08/05/dte-energy-electric-rate-hikes/1900782001/) to do so). The rate hikes were largely at the hands of the investor-owned, state-regulated utility company, DTE Energy, which made an interesting demand when Highland Park residents could no longer afford to pay the maintenance bill for their streetlights.

“In 2011, DTE gave [an] ultimatum to the City of Highland Park that they [either] pay the debt associated with the streetlights’ maintenance costs or lose them, and unfortunately, the city was in no position to pay their debt, so DTE followed through and [removed](https://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/2011/10/lights_out_highland_park_loses.html) more than 1,000 streetlights from the city,” says Mojica. “They didn’t remove everything. They left the stumps as a reminder to the community of their presence.”

When like-minded community members, led by Highland Park resident [Shimekia Nichols](https://www.soulardarity.com/staff) (who is now Soulardarity’s executive director), organized as a result of the streetlight removal, they formed Soulardarity to bring light back to the community. After gathering funds from local residents, the first solar-powered streetlight was erected in 2012 in the neighborhood known as Avalon Village in Highland Park.

Soulardarity’s mission isn’t only to illuminate their streets with solar energy but also to shine a spotlight on the failed model of electricity production that for-profit, investor-owned utility providers like DTE Energy represent.

“DTE increases the rates they charge customers on a regular basis, exacerbating financial distress [for] communities of color, and despite the profits they’re raking in, they’re not using it to reinvest in their infrastructure. As a result… [the communities in Highland Park] have a poor level of service,” says Mojica. He adds that in the summer of 2021, “for example, Southeast and mid-Michigan [experienced](https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/michigan/2021/08/12/massive-power-outages-hit-michigan-nearing-historic-2017-wind-storm-totals/) a huge number of blackouts, which are in DTE’s service area.”

Mojica points to the rippling effects of frequent power outages, especially in the summer and winter months, which can lead to refrigerated groceries that cost hundreds of dollars going bad as a result of these outages or can lead to rising hotel costs that may cripple the budgets of poor families living from paycheck to paycheck.

Currently, Soulardarity has been sifting through the language of the latest budget bills to ensure they provide funding for renewable energy projects in communities like Highland Park. Specifically, Soulardarity is seeking funds from the Department of Energy’s [Communities LEAP program](https://www.energy.gov/communitiesLEAP/communities-leap), which provides “supportive services valued at up to $16 million for community-driven clean energy transitions.”

Soulardarity has also completed an analysis in partnership with the [Union of Concerned Scientists](https://www.ucsusa.org/) to outline what a clean energy, net-zero future would look like in Highland Park in the future called [Let Communities Choose](https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/let-communities-choose-clean-energy#read-online-content).

“Ultimately, we want to break free from DTE, and in this analysis we found that it is doable,” says Mojica. “Not only that, but there are a number of community benefits that would come with the transition to renewable energy in the form of job creation and economic development, and our communities would be healthier and safer—basically, dramatically improving the quality of life for all community members.”

**Internet Access for All American Communities as a Gateway to Democracy and Equity**

While the replacement of fossil fuels with renewable energy sources like solar is essential to preventing further global warming and boosting local economies, power also comes in the form of information. When access to high-speed internet is controlled by corporations that operate in a similarly monopolistic manner as utility companies like DTE Energy, underserved communities suffer, especially during situations like the ongoing pandemic.

“If you aren’t fortunate enough to live in a place with affordable and reliable high-speed internet, you are essentially locked out of participating in modern society in so many ways, whether it’s distance learning, telemedicine, entertainment or even civic participation,” says [Sean Gonsalves](https://ilsr.org/about-the-institute-for-local-self-reliance/staff-and-board/sean-gonsalves-2/), senior reporter for the Institute for Local Self Reliance’s [Community Broadband Networks Initiative](https://muninetworks.org/content/our-vision). “These problems really came to the fore during the pandemic.”

Currently, the high-speed internet market and broadband infrastructure, especially in rural communities, are inadequate, according to Gonsalves. When internet service providers are for-profit monopolies, large segments of the country either can’t afford reliable internet service, or don’t have access to high-speed broadband.

“When a community is reliant on outdated technology like DSL, they can’t even have a Zoom meeting, and good luck sending an email,” says Gonsalves. “In a healthy functioning market, people have choices, but when it comes to broadband, there aren’t options, which leads to high prices, poor customer service and bad coverage.”

To gain more reliable and affordable internet service, cities across the United States have formed their own municipal broadband networks to compete with the existing monopolies. Cities [like](https://ilsr.org/fighting-monopoly-power/broadband-monopolies/) Longmont, Colorado; Wilson, North Carolina; and Chattanooga, Tennessee, have transformed their economies and communities after organizing to create their own municipal broadband networks.

“The golden child is [EPB](https://epb.com/about/history/) in Chattanooga, which is a city-owned utility,” says Gonsalves. “Not every community can do what Chattanooga has, but in terms of benefits, the [return](https://broadbandbreakfast.com/2021/10/mike-harris-investing-in-open-access-fiber-optics-is-investing-in-the-future/) on investment was $2.7 billion in the first 10 years of operation.” With federal legislation like the American Rescue Plan and Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act setting aside resources to increase and strengthen community broadband networks, Gonsalves and others at the Community Broadband Networks Initiative are hopeful that more communities will organize and take advantage of these opportunities and create their own broadband networks with the use of federal funding.

“The infrastructure bill represents a watershed moment in terms of the largest investment by the federal government in broadband ever,” says Gonsalves. “Even private investors are showing interest in community broadband, and now is the time for communities to start planning and pushing forward in an organized and strategic way.”