**Headline:** How Community Solar Can Liberate You From Fossil Fuels

**Teaser:** Local and rural cooperative utilities can use community solar to meet unique place-based clean energy needs.

By L. Michelle Moore

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**Source:** Independent Media Institute

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**Tags:** Activism, Book, Climate Change, Community, Economy, Environment, Indigenous Resistance, Local Peace Economy, Opinion, North America/United States of America, Science, Tech

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**[Article Body:]**

Energy is the lifeblood of opportunity and economic development and a pillar of human civilization in the 21st century. Even the most remote communities in rural America were welcomed into the industrial age when electricity was made available to them in the 1930s. This created an economic engine that attracted jobs and supported a quality of life previously unimaginable. However, challenges are now different in the information age and Anthropocene period. Our traditional energy choices are destroying the places we come from and love. But we can be better.

A different vision is possible: a future in which rural communities flourish. In this future, clean, resilient, and local energy, as well as the infrastructure investment required to build it, sustain good jobs in small towns as the abundant land in rural America is used to fulfill the energy needs of big cities. Farming families use unplanted fields for the “last crop,” earning a living from the power that’s freely and abundantly available in solar energy, thereby preserving generational wealth. And communities become more resilient, connecting local renewables with energy storage to improve energy futures for everyone.

Broadband—built and financed alongside the modern and secure power grid that it relies on—runs to every home, and its network is owned and governed by the communities it serves through rural and small-town public power utilities. These new high-speed networks also offer many educational options for kids who would otherwise rely on a much slower dial-up connection. Everyone has remote access to doctors, and no one has to drive hours for basic health care. Local businesses and startups can succeed because they’re finally connected to a global marketplace of people and companies that want to buy what they have to sell.

Rural and small-town utilities—the economic hearts of their hometowns—flourish because clean energy and the transportation sector’s electrification enable them to grow again. More revenue means more funding to support community development and pay for essential services, so residents thrive, too, because their utilities represent their needs and are governed in alignment with their democratic roots.

As a result, and perhaps most importantly, the [48 percent of Americans](https://news.gallup.com/poll/328268/country-living-enjoys-renewed-appeal.aspx) who want to live in a small town in the countryside can do so and have a good life there with jobs, affordable homes, and the possibility of an even better life for their kids.

How can we make this vision a reality? Community solar projects are unique in their ability to help neighbors within the same utility service territory share power from a solar project. Rural electric cooperatives, in particular, have long been leaders in community solar. The [National Rural Electric Cooperative Association](https://www.electric.coop/) even published a “[solar playbook](https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/Pages/SUNDA/The-Community-Solar-Playbook.aspx)” in 2016 to help local utilities develop business models and implementation plans for bringing community solar to their member-owners; though ironically, at the same time the playbook was being developed, NRECA was opposing clean energy legislation in Congress.

Because energy policies, natural and built infrastructures, community priorities, and market factors like energy pricing and price structures vary from place to place, there’s no one way to incorporate community solar into your local clean energy future. There are many great examples to look to for inspiration and guidance.

**Six Great Examples of Community Solar Projects:**

**1) Vernon Electric Cooperative**

[Vernon Electric Cooperative](https://www.vernonelectric.org/) completed the first community solar project in Wisconsin in 2014, and it has been sold out ever since. Local member-owners were invited to purchase shares of the 1,001-panel array at VEC’s headquarters.

The electricity production from each member-owner’s panels is credited against their utility bill, and panels can be bought and sold among members.Its model has created a strong sense of community ownership among participating residents. When heavy snow blankets the solar farm, members regularly call the utility to make sure the panels get cleared so they can keep producing power.

**2) Walton EMC**

[Walton EMC](https://www.waltonemc.com/)—the rural utility that won Facebook’s clean energy business—built its first one-megawatt community solar project in 2015. Member-owners can purchase up to two blocks of community solar at $25 per block, the production from which is credited to the member-owner’s utility bill.

Located on six acres next to its headquarters in Monroe, Georgia, Walton EMC’s first community solar project sold out, and the program quickly expanded to two additional sites. This early community positioned the company to become one of the Southeast’s leading utilities in solar development, attracting new businesses and investments to the area.

**3) ACCESS Project**

Building on this history of community solar leadership, the U.S. Department of Energy awarded NRECA a [$1 million multiyear research award](https://www.electric.coop/nreca-wins-doe-grant-to-research-better-ways-to-bring-solar-power-to-low-income-communities#:~:text=ARLINGTON%2C%20Va.%20%E2%80%93%20The%20Department%20of%20Energy,low%2D%20and%20moderate%2Dincome%20(LMI)%20consumers%20and%20communities.) to study pathways for making solar energy more accessible and affordable for rural households with low and moderate incomes.

The resulting [ACCESS Project](https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/access/Pages/default.aspx#:~:text=NRECA%27s%20project%2C%20Achieving%20Cooperative%20Community,%2Dincome%20(LMI)%20consumers.), which stands for Achieving Cooperative Community Equitable Solar Sources, was led by [Adaora Ifebigh](https://its.ucdavis.edu/people/adaora-ifebigh/), former NRECA program director for [Energy Access](https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/energy-access/Pages/default.aspx). The body of knowledge the ACCESS Project is creating is a rich resource for understanding how rural cooperative utilities can use community solar to meet their unique, place-based needs.

**4) Anza Electric Cooperative**

The [Anza Electric Cooperative’s](https://www.anzaelectric.org/) SunAnza and Santa Rosa Solar projects are among those being studied. AEC was born in the 1950s, when local residents, frustrated with the high cost of power from California Electric, reached out to the [Rural Electrification Administration](https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2016/05/20/celebrating-80th-anniversary-rural-electrification-administration) and began the process of funding and forming their own local electric cooperative. Located in rural southwestern California, AEC serves [about 5,200 residential member-owners](https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/access/Documents/Advisory-ACCESS-Case-Study-Anza-Oct-2020.pdf) and has a long-term agreement to provide power for the Santa Rosa Band of Cahuilla Indians.

The success of its first solar project, SunAnza, demonstrated how solar could help reduce peak electricity costs for the utility and its members. As a result, AEC began work on a second community solar project on tribal lands. By pairing community solar with a time-of-use tariff that charges less for electricity usage at off-peak hours, the Santa Rosa Solar project will share annual savings estimated at [$600 to $1,000](https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/access/Documents/Advisory-ACCESS-Case-Study-Anza-Oct-2020.pdf) per participating household.

**5) Roanoke Electric Cooperative**

Consistently among the vanguard, [Roanoke Electric Cooperative](https://www.roanokeelectric.com/) takes a different approach. It uses philanthropic support and leverages other programs to deliver extra savings to member-owners through the [Roanoke SolarShare](https://www.roanokecooperative.com/clean-energy-solutions/community-solar-low-income-assistance-program/) program.

Philanthropic donations pay for no-cost community solar shares for low-income member-owners, reducing their utility bills. The first fruits of the savings are used to cover the costs of home repairs, like fixing leaky roofs. These are necessary to enable energy upgrades, such as insulation, which deliver even more savings through energy efficiency.

**6) EnerWealth Solutions**

Then there is the reparative and restorative approach to solar development pioneered by [EnerWealth Solutions](https://www.enerwealthsol.com/who-we-are) in North Carolina, which supports small and minority landowners with a unique profit-sharing model that channels some of the revenue into a local community development nonprofit controlled by member-owners.

**An Abundance of Opportunities in Your Community**

There are many opportunities to support your community’s vitality with solar power. You can begin locally by working with your state’s energy policy and market structure, changing regulations if necessary, using the land responsibly, working with partners who share your values, and choosing from various solar scales and models to match your and your neighbors’ needs.

This approach is liberating compared to the constraints of a scarce fossil fuel-powered energy system that takes resources from one place and burns them in another to create enough power to support new industries and opportunities.

As you’re building your solar strategy, don’t resort to what’s been done in the past when you have the chance to build a new system based on better values—a system whose benefits can be seen within your generation. Always keep in mind why rural cooperatives and public power utilities were created in the first place: to enable rural and small-town communities to come together to own their power generation. The field is wide open and the harvest is ripe. Take deep breaths, roll up your sleeves, and get ready for the joyful work.

As you do so, lead with love. Localizing your community’s energy system with clean power is an opportunity to achieve a healthier balance between the natural and built environments. Economically, such power production and delivery also benefit communities by sustaining them rather than extracting their wealth. Keeping our love for our hometowns and neighbors at the forefront will help us make decisions we can be proud of as we navigate the road ahead.

It will be hard. Sometimes, the people and companies that benefit from traditional power generation methods might resist you and fight for the status quo, and you may get tired. But as the Good Book says, “Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.” So don’t give up; you’ll see the results in your lifetime.

Clean energy offers us a future; many different futures, in fact. The possibilities are as diverse as the places we live, the ways we make decisions, and the renewable resources we share. Let’s use this gift, and this moment of transformation, to build the kinds of energy futures that will enable us all to thrive.