HOW TO GET AWAY FROM DAD:

APPLYING BEST PRACTICES FOR MEANINGFUL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FOR CLEAN ENERGY

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The Institute for Rural Collaboration works to support collaborative forms of public engagement in relation to clean energy. We have traveled through the United States and consulted many development companies, public service commissioners and other professionals in the clean energy field and have published our research regarding public engagement and renewable energy specifically. It is clear there is a need for more meaningful forms of public engagement to continue to successfully establish clean energy projects.

In an overwhelming number of studies, recommendations identified the need for more respectful and deliberative forms of public engagement to avoid cancellations, delays or court cases.

We also found a considerable number of documents describing best practices for clean energy public engagement, all of which support deliberation and trust building.

In this publication, we describe how to apply those best practices by providing public engagement methods and steps appropriate for renewable energy projects. There are helpful best practice documents from organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, the National Renewable Energy Lab and the European Union that we recommend, which will be explored and explained later) as applying these practices requires more discussion.

In this document, we outline ten steps for efficiently and effectively applying best practices to ensure a public engagement process that is:

> Full, open, and transparent;
> Able to provide decision-makers with high-quality public input;
> Designed to ensure the public is treated with respect and meaningfully engaged in clean energy deliberations; and
> Structured so that ultimate decisions appropriately remain in the hands of decision-makers.

Our previous publication examined renewable energy. This document widens that lens to encompass clean energy and other emerging energy types, reflecting the ongoing evolution of the energy landscape. These best practices may also be appropriate for large-load facilities such as data centers and for construction of transmission and storage facilities.

In this document, we offer tools to support meaningful public engagement around clean energy. There are no guarantees: even when all best practices and recommendations are followed, no process can ensure that a project will be sited with full satisfaction from local residents. However, we believe that without using these best practices and tools, fewer clean energy projects will succeed and those that do will be less tailored to meet local needs and thus may engender greater long-term resistance.

2. SUMMARY OF "RENEWABLE ENERGY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: GETTING AWAY FROM DAD"

"The Renewable Energy and Public Engagement: Getting Away From DAD" report systematically explored the critical dynamics of public engagement and opposition in the context of renewable energy projects. It drew on a wide array of international case studies and scholarly insights describing:

> Public perceptions of clean energy and types of public engagement used in relation to renewable energy.
> A description of collaboration and collaborative-learning public engagement methods.
> Community concerns and their responses to renewable energy including an exploration of types of opposition and their methods.
> Renewable energy proponents', both corporate and governmental, responses to opposition, the roles of policy and decision space.
> Factors to consider in relation to public engagement and best practices, both from NGO's and social science.

This literature review revealed the persistent use of the "Decide-Announce-Defend" (DAD) approach in energy projects. The public perceives this approach as disrespectful and

untrustworthy, leading to delays, cancellations, and financial losses due to legal challenges and sustained opposition.

However, more deliberative and collaborative public engagement methods can mitigate conflict and enhance project efficiency and community benefits. Such approaches involve deeper engagements to fully explore benefits and costs to find community-inclusive solutions. This ultimately reduces the risk of costly legal disputes and fosters a sense of joint ownership and acceptance. The report highlighted recommendations including:

- Embark on early and continuous engagement, which is critical to prevent future setbacks and build a stronger foundation for project success.

- Use collaborative engagement practices to bridge the gap between developers and communities, thereby facilitating mutual benefits and enhancing both social and economic values.

- Challenges related to policy design and implementation, which often results in rapid development at the expense of thorough public engagement. This trend points to a pressing need for changes in policy and business approaches to not only mandate but also facilitate more substantive community involvement. This would ensure that development projects at least consider the interests and well-being of affected communities, and implement them where possible.

The report found that future renewable energy siting will require stronger, more meaningful public engagement. As development expands from sparsely populated areas into more crowded regions, public debate is becoming increasingly polarized. To navigate this shift, developers and government agencies will need to adopt more inclusive engagement methods that are also efficient in terms of time and cost. Effective collaborative engagement will lead to better outcomes for developers, communities, energy providers, and broader decarbonization goals.

Box 1

An example from January 19, 2026: a wind energy project was proposed to and considered by a county commission in the Midwest. The project was approved by the commission in a regular, public meeting and reported in local news. Local people were stunned to hear about this news, opposed the decision and organized town meetings with anti-wind groups. The meetings were well attended, primarily by residents opposed to the development. Subsequent Commission meetings had to be held in a large auditorium to accommodate the large number of opponents. The company made $ 17 million in concessions, which had to be deposited up front. The landowners involved are dealing with the uncertainty of the situation and stand to lose $ 27 million in payments from the developer. The county could lose $19 million in tax revenue over the project's first 30 years. As of reading the article, no money had been deposited, and the company has gone quiet about the project...

3. BEST PRACTICES

Based on our literature review, we have compiled the best practices recommended by the U.S. National Renewable Energy Laboratory (Ross and Day, 2022), the Institute for European Energy and Climate Policy (Susser et al. 2024), The Nature Conservancy (Markkanen et al., 2024) and the U.K. based REGEN (Windermere and Hayes, 2025). Similar documents, including a review of public engagement cases in energy infrastructure projects (Susser et al., 2024), ensure recommendations are grounded in research, practice and case studies. (See Table 1).

The best practices recommended by the four institutions (see Table 1) largely overlap. However, applying them varies depending on factors such as geography, demographics, politics, economics, and local attitudes. For instance, many best-practice frameworks call for a stakeholder assessment to understand community context and beliefs about a

project. Yet stakeholder assessments themselves involve a range of methods and approaches, and these best practices do not provide guidance at that level of detail.

These best practices do not address topics such as choosing decision rules, determining when to use bounded (stakeholder-based) versus unbounded (public) processes, selecting appropriate information-sharing methods, the value of breakout groups, or the type of facilitator to hire. These elements add another layer of complexity—one that many governments and corporations either lack familiarity with or view as too complicated— leading them to forgo more collaborative public engagement methods.

The remainder of this document provides an overview of two widely used types of collaborative public engagement processes and outlines key considerations for ensuring that these approaches are genuinely collaborative in practice.

While many books have been written over the years on what constitutes meaningful public participation, the purpose of this overview is to equip readers with a practical understanding of how to develop a truly collaborative process.[1]

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[1] For additional resources, see the John S. McCain National Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution (https://www.udall.gov/ourprograms/institute/institute.aspx) and the Partnership and Community Collaboration Academy (https://www.partnership-academy.net/resource/collaborative-conservation-spectrum-of-public-engagement/).

Table 1: Overview of Best Practices

	REGEN (British Non-profit)	IEECC (Institute for European Energy and Climate Policy)	NREL (National Renewable Energy Laboratory)	TNC (The Nature Conservancy)
Engagement Approach	Be prepared with knowledge about the site, the proposal(s) and the local content	Have a defined budget: weigh early-stage engagement vs. costs of avoiding it.	Be humble and authentic: be straightforward, lose the titles, acknowledge local expertise.	Begin at the beginning i.e. in advance of project launch.
Stakeholder Assessment and/or Mapping	Engage early with all stakeholders, including hard to reach residents and opposition groups.	Be inclusive, also of hard-to-reach groups. Involve the public early and continuously.	Build an understanding of opinions, community history and context and views on collaboration.	Map and involve all stakeholder groups and their interests, including marginalized segments. Understand and respect the local context, characteristics and priorities.
Connecting to the Community	Ensure communities feel engaged and heard.	Enable the public to be involved in decision-making.	Meet the community where they are, make it easy to participate.	Employ local liaisons and experts, e.g. facilitator.
Information and Learning	Be upfront about challenges and trade-offs while emphasizing the long-term benefits for communities.	Establish a process where information is shared openly.		Keep public informed throughout project lifecycle.

	REGEN (British Non-profit)	IEECC (Institute for European Energy and Climate Policy)	NREL (National Renewable Energy Laboratory)	TNC (The Nature Conservancy)
Full, Open and Transparent Exchange	Understand objections. Acknowledge Concerns. Engage and communicate Proactively. Build trust through transparency. Be prepared with clear, fact-based responses. Use trusted, independent sources. Make information easy to understand.	Create transparent process to trust in and between different stakeholders through an inclusive, fair, transparent and equitable process	Democratize participation, ensure all have equal access.	Avoid process fatigue and focus on quality. Create a well-designed process that maximizes public's time and energy with quality information sharing. Ensure a fair process that allows residents to influence the development's design and operation.
Methods	Use different methods, e.g. collaborative mapping, design workshops, simulations.	Engagement process aim should be to maximize benefits for public.		Use a variety of engagement methods incl. e.g. GIS.
Create Trust with the Public through Accountability		Explain how the results of the engagement process influenced the design and operation of project. Best done continuously over time.		For best results, use a co-design approach where decisions are receptive to community feedback.
Community Benefits	Maximize the impact of community benefits, consider shared ownership, Community Benefits Agreement or Development Agreement	Create local and regional added value during construction phase and long-term e.g. through employment or community funds.		Equity considerations and benefit sharing arrangements influence how communities perceive and handle the project's impacts.

The Rocky Mountain Institute's report on Community Benefits Energy Projects also outlines best practices. The graph below highlights many recommendations in line with other assessments. It also provides a clear illustration of an energy projects progression.

Graph 1

Secure project go-ahead	Build stakeholder relationships		Determine benefits		Track and report outcomes
		Seek meaningful community and labor input	Invest in a strong local workforce	Increase energy resilience	Use measurable metrics connected to project outcomes
	Center on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility	Provide transparency to local stakeholders	Decrease energy burden	Provide non-energy community benefits	Establish resources for data gathering, analysis, and reporting
Assess siting, permitting, and financial viability of project	Identify disadvantaged communities and those afected by the project	Establish partnerships for benefit implementation	Increase clean technology access and ownership for economic justice	Contribute local economic development benefits	Report regularly to the public for evaluation and comment

Source: Rocky Mountain Institute: Community Benefits Energy Projects. June 2025.

4. MEANINGFUL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: WHAT ARE CONSENSUS BUILDING AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT METHODS?

The aim of both consensus building and collaborative learning is to have stakeholders address the future of a complex issue that affects them all. These two types of public engagement processes have five characteristics:

1. Stakeholders are interdependent.
2. Stakeholders are diverse, with different values, and desiring different outcomes.
3. Allows solutions to emerge that otherwise would not be realized by dealing constructively with differences.
4. Increased joint ownership of outcomes results.
5. Collaboration emerges as a natural outcome.

The Collaborative Learning and Consensus Building approaches described here are most consistent with the "Involve" and "Collaborate" levels identified in the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) Spectrum.

The public engagement processes prioritize multiparty learning as the essential first step. When participants learn together, more collaborative outcomes can follow. This form of learning—an open exchange of information among all stakeholders, rather than a one-way presentation with a brief question-and-answer period—distinguishes these approaches from more minimal forms of public involvement. It requires designing and facilitating activities such as workshops, field visits, and other interactive events that encourage shared learning, creative thinking, constructive debate, evaluation of trade-offs, and joint problem-solving.

Unlike a traditional town hall meeting, which provides little opportunity for deliberation among participants, this approach uses a structured process to explore issues, understand trade-offs, and generate options or solutions collectively. To maintain full transparency, decision makers later explain how stakeholder input was incorporated—or why certain suggestions could not be included—into final decisions. This represents a Full, Open, and Transparent Exchange (FOTE) approach that includes all stakeholders, including those who may oppose the proposed direction.

Table 2

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION →

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Collaborative public engagement is appropriate when there are multiple stakeholders who are interdependent (affected by same situation) and independent because they have different values and views. A collaborative public engagement process is particularly effective in contentious and complex renewable energy debates because it creates a structured space for stakeholders to learn together and deliberate constructively. By acknowledging these differing viewpoints while emphasizing shared impacts, the process helps build understanding, reduce conflict, and support more durable, broadly acceptable decisions.

The design of the process is determined by the specific issues being addressed. If the issue is an ordinance, recommendations for ordinance language may be the outcome. If a project's developer wants to meaningfully include the public's thinking, the outcome might be a revised design that incorporates community suggestions. If the issue is a clean energy development proposal, a community benefits agreement (CBA) or development agreement could memorialize a collaborative outcome.

A CBA is a voluntary but legally binding agreement between a developer or company and local organizations that directs benefits from new development projects to the citizens of the community. These benefits vary based on a community's needs and are negotiated before government approval. Local or state agencies can act as convener of these collaborative negotiations and eventually as the enforcer of the agreement (World Resources Institute).[2]

5. WHAT DOES COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE?

Two types of processes have considerable research and practice behind them: Collaborative Learning (Daniels and Walker, 2001) and Consensus Building (Susskind et al., 1999, 2022). Many facilitators are experienced in using both, depending on purposes, time constraints, budgets and the necessary outcomes. All three are based on the principles of "Getting to Yes" (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 2011).

The collaborative public engagement process involves four key roles: the convener, the decision maker, the participants, and the facilitator. The convener is the organization that initiates or commissions the public process—typically an agency, county, state, or municipality—whose primary interest is ensuring that a credible and effective process takes place. The decision maker may be the convener but is not always the same entity. In clean energy contexts, the decision maker may be the project developer and/or the government authority responsible for reviewing and approving the proposal. Participants are members of the public who attend meetings, offer perspectives, and consider trade-offs in pursuit of informed, constructive dialogue. Finally, the facilitator is the individual or firm engaged by the convener to guide the process and ensure a full, open, and transparent exchange that enables all parties—participants, conveners, and decision-makers—to fulfill their respective roles effectively.

1. Choosing a Process: Collaborative Learning

A collaborative learning (CL) process is unbounded: any member of the public may attend. A CL process usually consists of several workshops. All relevant information about the project and its trade-offs is shared and discussed, after which breakout groups conduct the detailed deliberation. Each workshop concludes with a plenary discussion of the groups' insights and the next steps in the process. A typical CL process might unfold as follows: the first workshop

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[2] See the Sabin Center for examples https://climate.law.columbia.edu/content/community-benefits-agreements-database or the World Resources Institute. Although there are more types of agreements, e.g. a Host Community Agreement and others, this review will continue to refer to CBA's as a possible outcome of a collaborative learning process.

identifies participants' interests and issues; the second focuses on deliberating options that address those issues; and in the third, the developer or other decision-maker reports back on which participant-generated ideas were incorporated into the project's final design and why. They also explain which ideas were not adopted and provide the rationale for excluding them.

The intent of these processes is to incorporate participants' contributions to the fullest extent feasible. While the process does not promise that every public suggestion will be implemented, the decision-making authority is clearly identified. Participants receive a complete and transparent accounting of how their input informed the final decisions, but the process does not require consensus or formal agreement from the public. In cases where full public access to a process is critical, a collaborative learning process may be the right choice.

Box 2

The design methodology we use is based on the book "Getting to Yes", and other sources, and is represented by the acronym: **PRIIOCTA**.

Pr – Ensure participants identify the **Problems** (or Issues)

I – Ensure participants identify their **Interests**

I – Ensure participants identify the **Information** that participants will need to deliberate possible outcomes that can lead to sustainable solutions.

O – The process needs to ensure participants can formulate possible outcomes: **Options**.

C – Establish **Criteria** against which Options are weighed, these are usually the Interests: Which options meet as many **of** the interests as possible?

T – Ensure that based on the Information, participants can fully deliberate the **Trade-offs**.

A – Ensure a process takes adequate time to finalize any **Agreement**, especially if the process is a consensus building process, e.g. a Community Benefits Agreement. If this is a collaborative learning process, the deliverable may be the outcomes of workshops where all participants have discussed together, and recorded, their **Interests**, the issues and **Options** that may lead to **Agreements**. More about this distinction is detailed below.

When a CL process is carried out effectively, participants generally feel respected and confident that their ideas were given genuine consideration by the time decision-makers report in the third workshop what was and was not incorporated. Even when some outcomes

are disappointing, participants typically gain a clearer understanding of the reasons behind the final decisions. From the facilitator's perspective, the primary tangible deliverable—the "A" in PRIIOCTA (see Box 2) is a comprehensive report documenting the process, the participants, and the resulting outcomes. From the perspectives of participants, the convener, and the facilitator, the key procedural deliverable is the assurance that the process was FOTE: a full, open, and transparent exchange.

Choosing a Process: Consensus Building

A consensus building process is bounded: meaning that designated representatives of all stakeholder groups participate, working through every step of PRIIOCTA (see Box 2) and ultimately voting on recommendations or another type of agreement. Whereas a CL process focuses primarily on identifying issues, interests, and options, a consensus-building process moves through the full PRIIOCTA framework to develop the greatest level of agreement possible among the stakeholders at the table.

This method is well suited for contentious and complex topics and can deliver actionable recommendations. The PRIIOCTA framework enables participants to become familiar with each other, the issues, the information and the reasons why options are acceptable or not, in turn allowing them to use all this knowledge to craft agreements. The recommendations typically emerge from a broad list of potential options. Participants work collaboratively to shape the language of each proposal so that it reflects and balances as many interests as possible. These proposals are then tested for their level of consensus and are categorized in the final report as areas of full agreement, positions with major reservations, or issues where no consensus was reached. Elected officials or other decision-makers can then determine how to proceed based on this guidance. The press and the public may attend the meetings, and the agenda includes designated times for public input.

A consensus building process works well, for example, to craft a Development Agreement or something similar. It provides a concrete outcome that participants can focus on and that all parties can rely on once the process concludes. As with any meaningful, FOTE-based public engagement effort, it requires greater time and resources at the outset, but the resulting legitimacy and reliability—along with the economic and long-term reputational benefits— make the investment invaluable and ultimately reduce costs over time.

Participants in a consensus-building process ideally represent all relevant interests, as identified through the stakeholder assessment. Although the convener may select individuals to represent these interests, doing so carries the risk of perceived bias. An alternative approach is to use an application process with clear qualification criteria—such as availability

to fully participate, the ability to negotiate rather than simply assert positions, and a commitment to treating the process and all participants with respect. The facilitator, ideally working with a steering committee, then selects representatives based on these criteria. Once the working group is formed and the process begins, its first task is to develop and agree on a charter that sets out the rules of engagement.

Choosing a Process: Combining collaborative learning and consensus building.

A public engagement effort can integrate both approaches, by combining full public access to information using collaborative learning workshops and the deep deliberation of a consensus building process. A facilitator can design a process that involves:

- Collaborative Learning workshop to discuss issues and options
- Consensus building working group to deliberate information needed, additional options, deliberates trade-offs and creates recommendations.
- A second collaborative learning workshop presents the draft CBA and discusses any suggestions for change.
- A last gathering of the working group reviews the suggestions and finalizes the CBA.

Box 3

A Note About Legal Advantage: Two factors can make the difference in court if a project is challenged under the argument of being arbitrary and capricious:

1.   The amount of effort that a convener takes to ensure a process is full, open and transparent.

2.   The extent and the fairness of a decision-makers' deliberations in weighing all alternatives. consider all options will count in court if a party sues after the conclusion of a process.

6. GETTING AWAY FROM DAD: 10 STEPS TO MEANINGFUL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The research we've done regarding studies of opposition to renewable energy shows that it is not necessarily tied to the technology, driven by climate change deniers, and/or not understanding the need for renewable energy development. Many opponents simply want to have a conversation about how to develop and explore options to meet their interests and receive some accountability in return. Not meeting that desire can, and often does, have opportunity costs.

No matter how restrictive or vague planning and permitting policies are, possibilities exist for developers to use more participative engagement methods. Even amid most opposition, it is possible to increase social license by engaging early and appropriately.[3] By beginning with a stakeholder assessment, the organization can both identify viable opportunities for engagement and determine whether conditions are suitable to proceed with the process. Collaborative learning and/or consensus building are forms of negotiation that can serve clean energy. If there is a "knowledge deficit" among the public about technical aspects, there is equally a "knowledge deficit" among corporations and governments about these negotiation techniques.

The following will show how to put best practices into action. This is critical because well-designed public engagement depends not only on what should be done, but on how it is carried out in real-world settings. This represents only one approach; other public-policy facilitators employ their own methods. It remains essential, however, to select a facilitator who is locally based and attuned to the community's culture and geographic context.:

1. **Ensure neutral facilitators and conveners early**

   For a process to be viewed as legitimate and trustworthy by all stakeholders, both its procedures and outcomes must be facilitated by individuals perceived as neutral. The convener—the entity initiating the public process, which may or may not also be the decision-maker (e.g., a county, land board, or economic development agency)—is responsible for selecting a facilitator who is broadly regarded as impartial. A state agency or local government can serve as the convener so long as it is perceived as not favoring any particular outcome. The convener provides a clear direction to participants and facilitators, such as: "Deliberate the trade-offs associated with XYZ and provide county commissioners with recommendations," or "Evaluate the trade-offs and develop agreements for a Community Benefits Agreement." Without both the convener and facilitator maintaining strict neutrality throughout the process, it is unlikely that stakeholders will view the outcomes as credible.

2. **Timing is critical for messaging and early and appropriate engagement**

    A project needs to have assessed siting, permitting and financial viability before it is proposed and discussed in a location. Once approved, reaching out to all stakeholders needs to happen immediately. Do not delay public engagement and make sure to do it in a thorough manner. That process should:

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[3] Social license refers to the level of acceptance, trust, and legitimacy that a community grants to a project or developer—beyond what is legally required—based on how fairly, transparently, and respectfully they feel engaged in the process.

a. Establish the convener who will oversee the public engagement process, possibly with a steering committee consisting of diverse participants.

b. Hire a third-party facilitator to conduct public engagement proceedings. Again, neutrality and experience in guiding deliberative public engagement processes are critical. It is not easy to guide a public engagement process. This is especially true regarding contentious and complex issues.

c. Charge the facilitator with conducting a stakeholder assessment to map stakeholders.

3. **Stakeholder or Situation Assessment Interviews**

To ground a public engagement process in participants' reality, it is important to gather information from them regarding context, people, process and issues. Usually, a facilitator will find out from various sources what interests stakeholders have and who could speak to those interests. At a minimum, conduct a first round of interviews to determine the following:

a. The experiences the stakeholders have had with previous developments. Inquire also about benefits and risks the stakeholder perceives regarding the project in question.

b. Their willingness to participate in a collaborative public engagement process and their reasons for being willing or unwilling.

c. The best and worst possible outcomes stakeholders see coming from this process for themselves and their community after one and ten years.

d. The factors needed for this process to be effective including who needs to be in the room.

e. Other additional information participants would like to share.

Question d. will generate the second, and maybe third, round of interviews. The number of people interviewed is not as important as ensuring all interests and views are included in the final stakeholder assessment report. Interviewees are anonymous and in no way identifiable in the report.

Share this stakeholder assessment report and the map with the interviewees and everyone else, including the media. Including the media is often a regulatory requirement and advisable to ensure full transparency. This accomplishes several important goals: 1) It demonstrates that all interests are being listened to and advised, sending the clear signal that public engagement will be locally grounded and meaningful. 2) That issues are complex and quick fixes are not realistic. 3) It allows the facilitator to design a process that reflects

stakeholders' actual experiences, perspectives, and local context. This helps ensure the process resonates with all stakeholders and strengthens the legitimacy of both the process and its outcomes.

Graph 2: Based on stakeholder assessment questions, a characterization of levels of support can emerge like the one below.

Stakeholder Group	Key Groups or Organizations	Key Engagement Priorities
Supporters	Commerce chambers, municipal governments, large customers sensistive to outage costs, EPC contractors, medical and emergency management organizations.	**Capitalize on their enthusiasm** — identify meaningful opportunities to reflect the facilitation or resources of these organizations in formal agreements.
Neutral	Local labor unions, customers in system areas with multiple redundancies (or own backup power), Indian Tribes, local government officials.	**Emphasize their points of value** — identify what matters to neutral stakeholders who could be pivotal and focus on these issues to convert them into supporters.
Resistors	Vulnerable consumers sensitive to rate increases and organizations advocating on their behalf. Proponents of grid defection (typically solar/storage aggregators).	**Listen, learn, incorporate, re-engage** — capture concerns in a way that does not assume "knowing the answer." Incorporate concerns into plans and regularly re-engage.
Detractors	Non-identified — but could include landowners or local conservation groups who may have reasons to actively interfere in access/work on specific sites.	**Focus on integrative rather than distributive outcomes .** Work to proactively identify through site-level projects planning work (once DOE funding approval is granted).

Graph from Rocky Mountain Institute: Community Benefits Energy Projects. June 2025

4. PRIIOACTA: Designing a public engagement process

The influential book *Getting to Yes* (2011) provides a foundation for any collaborative public engagement design. The design methodology we use is based on this book, and other sources, is represented by the acronym: **PRIIOCTA**.

Pr – Ensure participants identify the Problems (or Issues)

I – Ensure participants identify their Interests

I – Ensure participants identify the Information that participants will need to deliberate possible outcomes that can lead to sustainable solutions.

O – The process needs to ensure participants can formulate possible outcomes: Options.

C – Establish criteria against which Options are weighed, these are usually the Interests: Which options meet as many **of** the interests as possible?

T – Ensure that based on the Information, participants can fully deliberate the Trade-offs.

A – Ensure a process takes adequate time to finalize any Agreement, especially if the process is a consensus building process, e.g. a Community Benefits Agreement. If this is a collaborative learning process, the deliverable may be the outcomes of workshops where all participants have discussed together, and recorded, their Interests, the issues and options that may lead to agreements. More about this distinction is detailed below.

5. Ensure Complete Inclusion

At the outset of a collaborative process, there is often a temptation to exclude certain individuals perceived as "troublemakers" or "grandstanders." However, it is especially important that these voices have full access to the process, even if doing so requires additional effort from the facilitator. This inclusion provides evidence of the fairness and legitimacy with which the process is conducted to all stakeholders.

If a facilitator anticipates that opponents will attend, and may attempt to disrupt the process, there are strategies to help them express their concerns—especially the reasons behind their objections—while redirecting their energy into more constructive participation. When other participants commit to following the meeting guidelines, a shared norm often emerges that favors productive dialogue. Breakout groups are particularly effective for bringing people with diverse viewpoints together in ways that help them feel engaged, productive, and confident that their contributions will be respected and taken seriously.

6. Know the Groan Zone

Any process goes through a phase or two where participants struggle with worries, distrust, complex information and/or with fatigue. These are the points where participants show their emotions, and possibly even outrage. Avoiding the Groan Zone is the reason why so much public engagement is using the DAD model.

During several phases of a process, participants, the convener and the facilitator may experience a "groan zone'. For example, at the beginning of a collaborative learning process there will be divergent thinking: all interests, issues and options are discussed and recorded. After which, there will be convergent thinking because information may be provided that demonstrates not all options are possible. Some participants may need more information to understand, or some may be distrustful of the information. At these times a facilitator and information providers have to be prepared to guide participants through this tough part. From a leadership perspective, it often requires persuasion and empathy.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GROAN ZONE
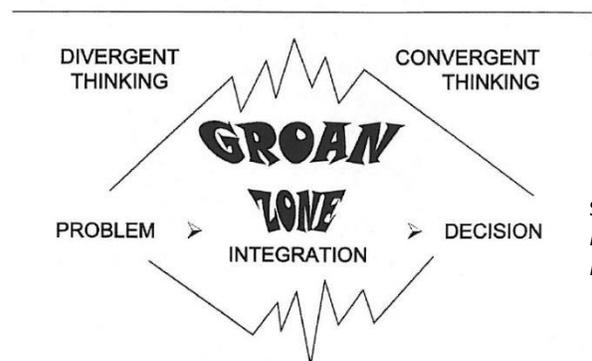
Source: *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making by Sam Kaner et al.* New Society Publiishers, 1996

Despite the discomfort, these phases are often where collaborative outcomes emerge that address and balance the widest range of stakeholder interests. In fact, groan zones, and the ability to navigate them, is the difference between more or less deliberative forms of public engagement. It is critical to appreciate this and embrace it for meaningful public engagement.

Successfully guiding a group through its "groan zones" requires a solid process design, a knowledgeable facilitator, and an engaged convener who understands group dynamics. Compassion, humor, and a clear grasp of how groups function are essential. Another example: if participants raise numerous questions about the effectiveness of a consensus building process design, the amount of work involved, the identity of the decision-maker, or other aspects of the effort, the facilitator must be ready to respond—often in several different ways—to help them reach a point where they are willing to "trust the process."

As the group works through these challenging phases and begins to engage more productively, trust in both the process and each other typically grows, along with the group's capacity to carry out the work needed to achieve meaningful outcomes. These groan zones

are a natural part of collaborative group behavior, and with thoughtful preparation and skilled facilitation, they can ultimately lead to highly productive results.

7. Better Alternatives to Negotiated Agreement

In our previous study, we found that in many clean energy proposal processes, one or more stakeholder groups pursued alternative paths outside the process to advance their interests. For example, some stakeholders chose to go to court, often with mixed outcomes (see box above). Similarly, when a developer withdraws from a project, it is frequently because they believe that exiting is a better option than continuing negotiations. Even efforts by opponents to spread misinformation and undermine trust—despite the existence of a meaningful public engagement process—can function as another form of opting out of the collaborative pathway.

Even when all recommended best practices are followed, meaningful public engagement may still fall short due to circumstances beyond the process itself. Understanding the fallback options available to each stakeholder helps anticipate these kinds of strategies. For instance, if an interest group is invited to participate but instead chooses to file a lawsuit while others remain at the table, the process can still proceed because the invitation was extended and their likely strategy was identified in advance. In such a case, no formal decision has yet been made for a court to review, reducing the likelihood that the litigation will halt the process.

8. Keep the Process Moving

Without compromising the integrity of the deliberation needs, keeping a collaborative process's momentum going is preferable to keep information on top of participants' minds, to avoid fatigue and to be respectful of participants' time.   While this takes an intense amount of work for all involved, it will ultimately save time, resources, money, and community division with a greater chance to achieve clean energy development.

9.   Documentation

Throughout any public engagement process, every step must be thoroughly documented and shared with all stakeholders. This ensures that participants in collaborative learning processes who miss a meeting, join late, or cannot attend consistently can reengage without losing context. Continuous documentation also keeps the broader public informed and provides clear evidence that the process is full, open, and transparent. Such records demonstrate that all stakeholder groups were identified and invited, that information and procedures were accessible to everyone, and that all participants had equal opportunities to engage. Moreover, if the outcomes

of the process are later challenged in court, this documentation becomes essential to demonstrating the fairness and integrity of the effort.

10. Follow Up

An essential best practice is to maintain follow-through after the conclusion of the public engagement process (See Graph 2). Evidence shows that continued engagement helps to maintain the social acceptance built during the initial public engagement. Engaging communities and stakeholders through the development process and beyond boosts a company's reputation as a good neighbor, employer, and provides benefits for the communities involved. This is important as clean energy projects maintain operations for decades.

7. CONCLUSION

Our research indicated the need to change public engagement methods that do not rely on Decide-Announce-Defend. Considering the increasing need for energy and energy infrastructure, and a growing opposition to some forms of development and energy needs, the studies in our literature review recommended overwhelmingly to build trust through meaningful public engagement processes that are transparent, fair, and deliberative processes. A number of these studies also outlined the advantages to the companies proposing infrastructure projects, and to other decision-makers for example time and cost savings.

In this document we have outlined the best practices described in the literature specifically related to energy development. We then outlined two types of public engagement methods, consensus building and collaborative learning, and 10 steps to put them into action.

To a reader unfamiliar with these practices and methods, engaging the public in this manner may seem daunting. These methods are undeniably "a lift" but once a community or company is familiar with using them, it becomes a reliable way of doing business, of unraveling complexity and finding as much agreement as possible. The first step, once a project has been internally approved within a company, is to hire an experienced, preferably local, facilitator.

Even when all best practices and recommendations are followed, no process can ensure that a project will be sited with full satisfaction from local residents. However, we believe that without using these best practices and tools, fewer clean energy projects will succeed and those that do will be less tailored to meet local needs and thus may engender greater long-term resistance.

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Written By:

Jessica M. Western, Ph.D.

biggoosecreekresolutions@gmail.com