

Meeting the Moment: How public engagement during a pandemic shaped planning decisions at two public utilities in Washington State

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, Washington State passed the Clean Energy Transformation Act (CETA) (SB 5116). In addition to committing to achieve a 100% clean electricity supply by 2045, CETA required that utilities take steps to ensure the transition to clean energy is equitable. These included identifying “vulnerable” populations in their territories, assessing the risks to them, and identifying specific actions to reduce those risks. All of which needed to be done through a public process in which utilities engaged their communities.

This paper describes how two Washington utilities, a public utility district and a municipal utility, met the requirements of the legislation, the challenges, and their collective learnings – both about how to conduct authentic public engagement during a pandemic and the benefits of equitable, participatory planning processes for utilities and their communities.

Both utilities engaged with community organizations rather than individual community members, a decision that met the needs of the moment and initiated what the utilities believe will be long-term relationships with those organizations. The insights shared by community groups during the engagement process led to unexpected outcomes. For example, while electric vehicles are a hot topic in climate circles, they ranked very low among the communities’ priorities relative to electrification of buses. Most important to the communities, and where the utilities will focus their work in the next years, is targeted outreach to identify and engage households in need of support and services to help them reduce energy burden, including innovative bill payment options, reduced fees, support paying bills, and energy efficiency measures to reduce costs.

Introduction

In 2019, Washington State passed the Clean Energy Transformation Act (CETA) (SB 5116). In addition to committing utilities to achieve a 100% clean electricity supply by 2045, CETA required that utilities take steps to ensure that the transition to clean energy will be equitable. These steps included identifying “vulnerable” populations in their territories, assessing the risks to them, and identifying specific actions to reduce those risks. All of which needed to be done through a public process in which the utilities engaged their communities.

This paper describes how two Washington utilities, a public utility district and a municipal utility, achieved the goals of the legislation, the challenges they encountered, and their collective learnings – both about how to conduct authentic public engagement during a pandemic and the benefits of equitable, participatory planning processes for utilities and their communities.

Equity requirements in the Clean Energy Transformation Act (CETA)

In addition to requiring 100% of electricity provided to Washington State customers to be entirely free of greenhouse gas emissions by 2045, CETA also included a set of requirements related - not to utility resource planning, but to the potential impacts that utility customers may experience as a result of greening the power supply. As the Washington State Department of Commerce noted, “CETA requires that equity considerations become an explicit part of utility planning.”

In integrating equity considerations into power planning, CETA called attention to the needs of two different groups: “highly impacted communities” and “vulnerable populations,” each of which was defined in the legislation but with enormous variation in specificity. CETA defined “highly impacted communities” as geographic areas that have been most severely impacted by fossil fuel use and other environmental hazards as well as areas at least partially in “Indian country” (the term used in the legislation). People living in highly impacted communities often have higher rates of poverty and/or negative health impacts. At the time that CETA passed, highly impacted communities had already been identified by the Washington State Department of Health, using a composite index that included numerous socio-economic, environmental, and health factors. Further, the Department of Health published all of the information in an [interactive online map](#).

For utilities, the health department’s map made it quick to identify the highly impacted communities in their service territories, which often correlated with areas known to have higher concentrations of low-income customers. One utility, for example, mapped customers with arrearages severe enough to merit disconnection under non-Covid-19 conditions against the highly impacted community identified in their territory and found a cluster of such customers in the identified community (City of Richland Energy Services, 2021).

Identifying vulnerable populations proved more of a challenge – the first of several the utilities would encounter when putting the new legislation into practice. The utilities certainly had a sense of which communities may be “vulnerable” and were further guided by the work of environmental justice advocates and writing on the intersection of equity issues in clean energy. However in this work the utilities were seeking to comply specifically with the CETA legislation and CETA did not define “vulnerable populations” but instead directed *utilities* to define vulnerable groups based on “adverse socioeconomic factors and sensitivity factors.” These factors, too, were undefined, except for the requirement that they be developed “through a public process.” Nearly immediately, the utilities realized the legislation created a Catch-22-like situation. Utilities needed to identify vulnerable communities and solicit their input through a public process. But the very definition of a vulnerable community hinged on input from those communities through that process!

CETA laid out several equity-related tasks for utilities which fell into one of two types of equity work, procedural and distribution, although neither term was used in the CETA legislation. Some tasks seemed intended to ensure the planning process included robust input from the targeted communities, a key objective of “procedural equity.” Others targeted an equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of the State’s transition to 100% clean electricity, targeting “distributional equity.”

With regard to distributional equity specifically, the utilities were required to:

- Assess the distribution of costs and benefits of the utility’s proposed actions to meet its clean energy targets,

- Assess the impact of actions the utility will take on highly impacted and vulnerable populations specifically,
- Reduce risks to highly impacted and vulnerable populations that are associated with the clean energy transition, and
- Create indicators that can be used to measure the utility’s performance on the above.

With regard to procedural equity, the utility was required to provide “reasonable” opportunities for customers and interested stakeholders to contribute to the development of all of the above, considering any potential barriers to participating they might face, including linguistic, cultural, economic, and technological barriers.

Challenges to public engagement during a pandemic

Implementing new legislation is challenging in any time and place. Language that seems clear in the State house leaves much room for interpretation during implementation. But the utilities complying with CETA faced an additional challenge, brought about by the broader context in which they were working: a global pandemic.

The CETA requirement to use a public engagement process to inform power planning decisions was among the utilities’ most challenging tasks, for several reasons.

- 1) The type of public engagement required by CETA was broader and deeper than utilities’ historical approach to taking public input through public meetings held at the utility’s office, and required utilities to do things they had not done before, including reaching out directly to community organizations, educating them about the power planning process, and incorporating their input into planning decisions.
- 2) Some utility staff were apprehensive about engaging the public on such difficult material.
- 3) The utility’s governing bodies, which included a City Council, an advisory committee, and a Board of Commissioners, all needed to be educated about the new CETA requirements and about the role of public engagement in the utility’s planning work.
- 4) The short timeline, governed by the due date for the utilities’ Clean Energy Implementation Plans, meant the utilities needed to act before all the details of the legislative rules were complete, requiring the utility to “build the bus while driving it.”
- 5) The restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic prevented the utilities from conducting engagement using their accustomed approaches – in-person meetings. It also stymied the use of recommended tactics for reaching populations who might not otherwise engage with a government agency or utility, including intercepts (in which customers are intercepted while going about their usual business, for example at a bus station), meetings held adjacent to community gatherings like religious services, and public events like community fairs or picnics.

It was this series of challenges that shaped the public engagement strategy the utility ultimately designed and executed.

The utilities' approaches to public engagement

Both utilities worked with an experienced facilitator and equitable program design consultant in developing their engagement strategy. The consultant suggested approaches to the utilities based on experience conducting engagement with and on behalf of community organizations and governments, as well as an understanding of successful approaches to equitable processes.

In this work, the consultant and the utilities prioritized deep and authentic conversations with community organizations serving “vulnerable populations” and “highly impacted communities” in their service territories. The utilities did consider alternative approaches, for example, virtual meetings or surveys with individual households. However, their decision to focus on *organizations* rather than *individuals* rested on three critical factors:

First, engaging with organizations rather than individual community members allowed for breadth (across different populations) and depth (detailed understanding of each population). Second, there were several longstanding community organizations active in the utilities' service territories that were willing to participate in the engagement process on the short timeline and through virtual (rather than in-person) meetings. And third, an emerging best practice for serving vulnerable populations involves working with trusted community partners. The utilities viewed their CETA-mandated engagement as a first step toward expanding their relationships with community partners to better serve priority populations in the years ahead.

Each utility implemented its engagement with community organizations in a way that fit its capacities and best leveraged its existing relationships. Both utilities created Excel spreadsheets of organizations with which the utility as an organization, or utility staff individually, had knowledge or previous connections. They then cross-referenced the populations served by each organization against groups the utility identified as potentially vulnerable (including low- and moderate-income households, people of color, non-English speakers, renters, people with disabilities, multifamily and mobile home residents) to ensure that every potentially vulnerable population was served by at least one organization on their list.

While both utilities used direct outreach to solicit community organizations to participate and relatively brief virtual workshops as the primary engagement format, the particularities of their implementations differed slightly. One utility held two one-hour virtual workshops with the organizations, following up with hand-written thank you notes and a small gift. The other utility used an online survey sent via email to both collect preliminary information on community priorities and also to interest organizations in the follow-on virtual workshop. The utility placed phone calls to each organization prior to the virtual workshop lasting 1.5 hours. The utility used fun rewards to interest potential participants. Survey respondents were entered into a drawing for a \$250 gift card and workshop attendees received lunch delivered to their home or office, a Yeti insulated mug, and a Starbucks gift card.

Number and type of community organizations that participated

Both utilities reached out to, and ultimately met with, similar numbers of community organizations – perhaps unsurprising considering their service territories are of similar size (one has approximately 25,000 customers and the other 35,000 customers). The starting point for each utility was a list of about 14 community organizations. Each utility's virtual workshops were attended by between six and eight organizations.

The participating organizations provided services related to:

- Public or affordable housing
- Public health
- Drug addiction
- People with developmental disabilities
- Seniors
- Homeless services
- Youth services
- Employment
- Services to tribes
- Leadership
- Gardening skills

Format and content of the virtual workshop

The virtual workshops were structured to allow participants to share their expertise and knowledge on their communities' needs and priorities, and how those might intersect with the work of utilities. To facilitate their ability to contribute, participants were offered a brief overview of the CETA requirements and high-level background information about power planning and energy efficiency. One utility created a [short video](#) that explained the CETA legislation and what utilities like theirs were required to do. The video was included in the online survey and sent to participants in advance of the virtual workshop.

Most of the meeting time was spent in facilitated discussion of the key topics laid out by the legislation. Both utilities used a skilled facilitator to help design and moderate the sessions:

- **Identifying vulnerable populations:** Participants were asked who they think may be vulnerable to changes that could occur with the transition to clean energy, such as rising electric rates.
- **Vulnerable populations' priorities and challenges:** Participants were asked what is most important to the communities they serve right now, including their biggest challenges or risks and the things they are focused on achieving.
- **Prioritization of possible actions:** Participants were introduced to a list of possible activities the utilities could undertake to ensure the transition to clean energy is equitable and were asked which seemed the most important and potentially most beneficial to the communities they serve. Participants also discussed what would be necessary to make the actions successful and the types of indicators that could be used to measure progress.

Insights from public engagement and how they contributed to power planning

Both utilities learned that there are multiple intersections between the priorities of vulnerable populations, the potential benefits of a clean energy transition, and the areas in which utilities can take action. Further, the utilities learned that community organizations care deeply about energy issues, a subject matter the utilities' thought might be too esoteric to peak the organizations' interests. And while one utility knew their organization was not always trusted by some communities, they did not realize just how much the lack of trust could prevent them from being able to serve vulnerable communities.

Identification of vulnerable populations

The first task during public engagement was for the utilities to understand who in their communities may be considered “vulnerable.” The contributions of community organizations led the utilities to identify several populations as potentially at-risk during the clean energy transition. Both of the utilities’ definitions emphasized economic vulnerability, with a recognition that the clean energy transition is likely to have significant cost impacts.

While both engagement processes yielded similar core insights about vulnerable groups, each utility chose to define them in its own way. One utility focused on housing and bill payment characteristics, two aspects of a household that utilities can identify using their own data. This utility developed a table that cross-referenced demographic characteristics with housing and bill payment (Table 1). In examining the housing characteristics of customers in arrears, they discovered that 77% were renters and that they were distributed across all housing types, confirming the need to focus on renters and validating the need to consider vulnerable populations across a range of home types.

Table 1. Identification of vulnerable populations using demographic characteristics

Description of vulnerable population provided by engaged community organizations	Populations the utility will target			
	Single-family homeowners experiencing generational poverty	Single-family and multi-family renters	Mobile/ manufactured home residents	Customers with a history of late payments, in arrears, or have received a shut-off notice
Seniors, retirees living on fixed income	X	X	X	X
Families in transition as a result of domestic violence, substance abuse, criminal justice system		X		X
Disabled	X	X	X	X
Limited English proficiency	X	X	X	X
Seasonal workers, refugees, immigrants		X	X	X
BIPOC women	X	X	X	X
At risk of homelessness	X	X	X	X

The other utility identified four specific populations with a high likelihood of vulnerability based on demographic characteristics and also with the ability, in most cases, to be identified by utility data (Table 2).

Table 2. Identification of vulnerable populations using housing and bill payment characteristics

Population	Details	Source
Low-income households	Households below 185% of the federal poverty level	Washington Tracking Network data & Energy Information Administration Form 861 (Utility vs 1 split)
Low-income seniors	Customers receiving the low-income senior discount	Utility customer data
Low-income customers with disabilities	Customers receiving the low-income disability discount	Utility customer data
Customers with unstable housing	Customers with a history of shutoffs	Utility customer data

Vulnerable populations' priorities and challenges

The virtual workshops with community organizations lifted up a common set of priorities and challenges across both utility territories. These included priorities and risks associated with the clean energy transition and those that are tangential to it. The number of issues community organizations are addressing on a daily basis is large, including finding and keeping housing, finding employment that pays enough, securing sufficient food resources, paying for utility services, and having access to phone and internet services. Specific to the utility system, the most critical risks to vulnerable populations included worries about rising electricity costs and temporary losses of electric service. The utilities honed in on risks related to housing as having the most intersections with utility work and the factor that perhaps most defines a population as vulnerable:

- **Unstable housing:** This includes people who are at risk of losing their housing or who are living in “unofficial” housing like converted garages and RVs. Community organizations described the many challenges their populations face with regard to housing, including rising housing costs, rising utility costs, unstable employment or low wages (leading to challenges affording housing).
- **Unhealthy rentals:** A second housing-related risk to vulnerable populations is faced by renters living in unsafe conditions, but who cannot move because of the high costs of moving and lack of other affordable options, and who may not feel empowered to request improvements from the property owner. Property owners who cannot afford to maintain their properties in good condition are also a priority group to serve.
- **Unhealthy single-family homes:** Homeowners living in generational poverty, many of whom are seniors and/or people of color, was a key group lifted up by community organizations and not previously recognized as a distinct need by utilities. These communities lack the resources to maintain the health and safety of their homes.
- **Increasing utility costs:** People in all types of housing who struggle to pay utility bills should be considered vulnerable, especially to any increases in utility cost associated with the clean energy transition. The utilities were particularly sensitive to the compounding debt associated with late and non-payment of utility bills. In addition, the utilities recognized that while they offer subsidies to customers who have qualified as “low income,” many people in need may not have received this designation.

- **Unhealthy mobile/manufactured homes:** People living in homes they rent or own that are unhealthy, uncomfortable, and expensive to heat/cool. These homes are often unimproved because of the high cost of the retrofits compounded by the inability of owners to obtain financing because of their low incomes.

Utility actions to reduce the risks of the clean energy transition

Their engagement with community organizations led utilities to focus their thinking on the challenges of housing stability and utility costs, two areas in which utilities are poised to support vulnerable populations through their actions on utility rates, bill payment options, and energy efficiency.

Table 3 summarizes the priority actions the utilities identified and their desired outcomes. These strategies were developed using input from the virtual workshops and data collected by one utility in an online survey:

1. Actions designed to address utility costs focus on ways the utility can help customers control costs and potentially mitigate the impact of future rate increases.
2. Actions designed to expand benefits from efficiency services are premised on the understanding that, while from a systems perspective, all utility customers benefit from the acquisition of energy efficiency as a low-cost resource, the comfort, health, and cost savings benefits of efficiency actions are experienced primarily by those who can afford the cost of purchasing efficient equipment or performing efficiency retrofits. Both utilities prioritized actions with the potential to help highly impacted community members and vulnerable populations receive more benefits from energy efficiency.

Table 3. Prioritized actions to reduce the risks of the clean energy transition

Desired outcome	Priority action
Keep utility costs as low as possible for vulnerable populations	Low-income discounts Analyze discounts provided to determine if they could be improved
	Low utility rates overall Help communities' keep overall rates low
	Provide bill payment options This includes levelized monthly billing, autopay, and pre-payment, all of which help households control utility costs by providing more information about energy use, preventing unexpectedly large bills, avoiding the need for a security deposit, and preventing customers from incurring fees associated with unpaid bills.
Provide the benefits of energy efficiency to vulnerable populations	Expand access to energy efficiency Apply new approaches to increase the populations that benefit from these services and incentives
	Provide energy efficiency to renters Work with property owners to improve the efficiency of rental units

Some of the actions the utilities identified were straightforward and, in fact, already in progress. One utility, for example, already offered levelized billing and autopay and was in the midst of developing a pre-payment option. Others were not as simple. How would utilities expand access to energy efficiency or provide efficiency services to renters?

Both utilities recognized that there were areas in which they could begin work immediately and others in which they needed to learn more before they could act. As a result, their lists of proposed actions included a mix of clearly defined activities and also places for further inquiry and program development:

- **Conduct targeted outreach to expand participation in existing efficiency programs for low-income seniors and low-income disabled customers.** An immediate opportunity one utility identified was to expand its outreach to priority populations to ensure that all qualified customers were signed up for and benefitting from the utility's current offerings, with an emphasis on no-cost benefits (for which the only barrier was hypothesized to be the potential participants lack of awareness). Ideas for expanded outreach suggested during the virtual workshop and which the utilities will investigate include communicating opportunities to K-12 students as a way of reaching their parents/guardians, participating regularly in a monthly multi-community organization meeting, communicating regularly with community organizations by attending their weekly meetings, sending information via mail to reach rural customers and via the utility's app/text alerts, translating materials into other languages including Spanish, Hmong, and Guatemalan, and making use of the utility's "language line" service.
- **Expand the use of pre-pay and budget billing by vulnerable populations.** Workshop participants were enthusiastic about the benefits of pre-pay and budget billing programs – a surprise to some efficiency industry veterans. One participant noted that the benefits of pre-pay billing have been "huge" for her organization's clients because its customers do not pay a deposit, thus freeing up capital that households and service organizations can use for other purposes. Another participant noted that budget billing may also be beneficial for customers who are on fixed incomes or don't have the ability to pre-pay due to unemployed. Together, these programs save customers from being assessed late fees and other collection fees. The utilities identified several ways they could work to expand the use of these advantageous billing options, including targeted outreach to customers with a history of billing issues including late payments, arrearages, and disconnection notices or shut-offs. Utilities will also explore defaulting customers with billing issues to levelized billing and offering incentives to customer to adopt alternative billing options. And, utilities would like to partner with community organizations to offer financial and efficiency education to these customers.
- **Evaluate opportunities to reduce energy burden of at-risk customers.** One utility will consider creating new programs to help reduce energy use and energy costs by increasing efficiency. These include services to conduct energy assessments to identify efficiency opportunities and programs to provide weatherization and ductless heat pumps to low-income customers. The utility will also consider whether these programs could be targeted towards areas with needed substation upgrades in the near future, providing a potential win-win solution of reducing energy burdens and deferring or avoiding substation upgrades that drive rate increases.

- **Employ cross-cutting strategies that will better enable vulnerable populations to take advantage of energy efficiency offers.** Input from community organizations lifted up several specific tactics utilities could employ to better serve vulnerable people. Some involve changes to current operating procedures while others require new actions on the part of utilities. They include:
 - Use a trusted source to bring information about efficiency opportunities: these include community organizations, schools, faith organizations, and individuals within the community.
 - Seek out ways to qualify participants for income-limited offers without asking for income and address verification.
 - Design offers such that the benefits to the participant outweigh the costs (both dollars and time) and perceived risks (for example: providing address or identification).
 - Evaluate both the benefits and costs from the participant’s perspective.
 - Simplify the demands of program participation, for example by reducing the complexity of applying, the time required, and by clearly and simply communicating what is being offered.
 - Keep in mind that poverty creates a short-term mindset. Develop offers in which the benefits are felt immediately and any payback is as short as possible (ideally one year or less).
 - Partner with community organizations in design and delivery of efficiency offers.
 - Conduct outreach about offers through multiple channels, meeting potential participants where they are (for example, at the farmer’s market WIC booth). Keep in mind that many populations have limited access to the internet.
 - Communicate all offers in the language in which people are most comfortable.
- **Evaluate opportunities to encourage the adoption of electric buses.** Community organizations identified transportation access and affordability as a key concern and expressed an interest in utilities working to encourage the adoption of electric buses. While not one of either utilities’ highest priorities, one utility is currently working with the local transit authority on infrastructure for electric bus charging and has a rate schedule for public electric vehicle chargers. The utility will evaluate what it could do to encourage further adoption of electric buses.

Recommendations for utilities conducting equity-focused community engagement

The lessons learned during the first-ever implementation of CETA-directed community engagement suggested several recommendations applicable to any utility conducting equity-focused outreach to its customers.

Set clear roles and responsibilities with regard to engagement activities

As with any novel task, it is important to clearly define the tasks to be conducted and the people responsible for them. Without clear roles and responsibilities, utility staff will not be certain whether tasks are their responsibility or someone else’s, potentially leading to gaps in implementation or confusion among utility staff.

Invest in internal communication and training

It is critical to explain the larger context for engagement work and provide training to staff who are new to the types of engagement activities involved. Without ample communication and training, utility staff may not understand the engagement process or what is required of them, and may feel unprepared to conduct the work. Especially where contributions from numerous teams within a utility are required (for example: customer service, energy efficiency and conservation, communications, power supply, a general manager or department director), utilities should expect to devote substantial time to internal communications among staff, including meetings and email updates devoted to the engagement process. When it comes to helping staff feel prepared to take on tasks that are new to them, there are many ways to do this, including having core staff (who are leading the process) lead engagement outreach, writing scripts for outreach conversations, and holding formal training sessions with the team.

Prepare stakeholders to contribute to equity-focused engagement

Utility stakeholders, including governing boards, elected officials, and expert advisers, are typically tasked with advising the utility on financial, technical, and operational matters, and may feel that providing input on equity and vulnerable population issues is not within their role or expertise. Further, they may lack the background or experience with issues of race, justice, and equity that will prepare them to engage on the questions raised by the requirements of legislation like those posed by CETA. Utilities working with external stakeholders can consider what contextual information will support their stakeholders or external advisors in contributing effectively to the equity-specific engagements work. This may include training on diversity, equity, and inclusion practices and theory as well as attention to the purposes of the utility's engagement work.

Assess whether and how the utility can compensate community organizations

Compensating participants in engagement work is widely recognized as a best practice and a critical element of fair and just treatment of those participants. But at times this can prove difficult for utilities and government agencies. It is fairly common for utilities and government agencies to be prohibited from directly compensating participants in community engagement work. When this is the case, a utility can compensate participants through other means including hosting a meal at meetings, a raffle and give-aways, and can also keep meeting times short so as not to overburden the participants.

Conclusion

In addition to informing the utilities' Clean Energy Implementation Plans, the learnings from the public engagement processes are informing other utility work. The success indicators developed for the CETA process are being incorporated into a new reporting dashboard. The learnings from the public engagement are informing a review of a discount program for low-income seniors and disabled households. And, the community engagement led one utility to consider electrification of public transit.

Finally, the utilities' view the new or renewed relationships with community organizations that resulted from the engagement process as a key benefit. They hope that

community organizations will continue to be partners with them in sharing information, helping get the word out about utility services and keeping the utilities informed about the needs of the community. Through this newly initiated communication channel, both the utilities and community organizations have realized there are ample opportunities for them to coordinate actions to the benefit of the utilities, the community organizations, and, most important, the highly impacted communities and vulnerable populations they serve.

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