# SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-CENTERED SOLAR DEVELOPMENT

## A GUIDE TO HOSTING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LARGE-SCALE SOLAR DEVELOPMENT

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*Cover photo by Samuel Faber (Pixabay).*

# Introduction

*This guidebook is intended to help you—whether you're a community leader, planner, advocate, developer, or interested resident—thoughtfully and proactively* plan for large-scale solar (LSS) development *in your area by hosting a "community conversation." We've aimed to describe a process and make recommendations that are as practical and applicable as possible.*

The time for such community conversations is now. The number, size, and deployment rate of LSS projects[1] have all increased significantly across the United States in recent years. This growth is driven largely by significant reductions in the cost of solar panels and installation, coupled with financial incentives for zero- and low-carbon electricity sources such as LSS.

As a result, more communities across the U.S. are likely to encounter solar development. The Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA) estimates that 40 gigawatts (GW) of solar will be deployed annually over the next five years. For reference, the U.S. currently has just over 200 GW of solar installed. One GW is equal to half the output of the Hoover Dam—enough to power 750,000 homes. Even if your community doesn't yet have a solar project in operation or under construction, it's possible that a developer has begun leasing land or conducting the environmental studies required to initiate a project. Communities that already host a solar project may also see proposals for additional projects.

Like all forms of power generation, solar energy has both positive and negative impacts at the local level. The rapid growth of LSS has heightened the urgency to understand these impacts. Furthermore, as with many land uses, individuals within a community may have different perceptions of how a new solar development could adversely impact or significantly improve their quality of life.

Now is an ideal time to hold community conversations about solar, creating a space for honest and open discussions about its associated tradeoffs. The specific purpose of these conversations may vary—from planning for solar to envisioning how LSS aligns with community goals or even just providing a forum for residents and large landowners to ask questions. Whatever the purpose, research supports the value of early and deliberate engagement around solar development.

You may have considered hosting a community meeting about solar but feel daunted by the time, money, and energy required to start the discussion. You might worry about the potential for conflict or disrespectful behavior. Perhaps you feel it would

*New York community meeting. Photo by Jacob White (Michigan State University).*

1 We consider solar projects that produce at least one megawatt ($MW_{dc}$) of electricity, are ground-mounted, and require at least five acres of land as "large-scale solar" (LSS).

be easier to avoid the conversation and let things unfold on their own. If so, you're not alone. Many others, including professionals we've worked with on this project, share these concerns.

However, research suggests that these conversations may be especially important in areas where anxiety about solar is high. We found that simply providing a space for people to voice their concerns to someone actively listening can help alleviate their worries about solar development.

In this guidebook, we outline a process for structuring community conversations that ensures everyone in your community feels welcome to share their perspectives and questions respectfully. We encourage both proponents and opponents of solar and renewable energy to participate actively and make their voices heard. We also provide strategies to help maintain a respectful atmosphere and prevent disruptions.

The types of conversations communities wish to have about solar vary, but we describe a tested process that we believe works well in most cases. This process was iteratively developed, facilitated, and evaluated in five different pilot communities across five states by five University Extension offices as part of the Community-Centered Solar Development (CCSD) project. The Extension professionals involved—Michigan State University (MSU), University of Wisconsin (UW), Cornell University (CU), University of Maryland (UMD), and Iowa State University (ISU)—all had experience in land use, energy siting, permitting, policy, and community engagement. Although each pilot conversation was tailored to the unique social, political, land-use, and economic context of its community and resulted in a distinct follow-up report, they all shared a common goal: **helping community members better understand, communicate about, influence, and align LSS development with their values, interests, and priorities.**

In this guide, we outline eight key steps to help you prepare, plan, and conduct a successful community conversation about solar:

- **Step 1: Assess the status of LSS in your community and policy environment**
- **Step 2: Define the purpose of your community conversation**
- **Step 3: Establish a local advisory group**
- **Step 4: Create an agenda for your community conversation**
- **Step 5: Select an appropriate date, venue, and duration for your conversation**
- **Step 6: Engage in outreach and market your conversation**
- **Step 7: Conduct your conversation**
- **Step 8: Reflect and report**

Along the way, we share examples, experiences, and lessons learned from our five Extension partners. While some of their meetings required significant investments of time, money, and labor, some did not, and your conversation doesn't have to either. Drawing on their experiences, we provide timelines for each step and offer practical tips for managing costs.

Finally, this guide includes a free Resource Library with slides, agendas, templates, and other tools to support your community conversations.

*Photo by Joerg Gastmann (Pixabay).*

## Step 1: Assess the Status of LSS in Your Community and Policy Environment

### 2-3 months prior to hosting a conversation

Before planning a conversation—or even determining if one is appropriate—it's crucial to assess the status of LSS development in your community, the local policy environment, and the predominant attitudes toward LSS. Previous experiences with LSS or other large infrastructure projects can influence how the conversation unfolds and its potential outcomes. Gathering this information, though time-consuming, is key to engaging residents and stakeholders effectively with an informed and relevant conversation.

To gather this information, we recommend using a variety of methods, such as consulting public datasets, reaching out to local officials, contacting local reporters or university Extension offices, and even collecting your own data. If projects exist or are planned, gauge the community's response. Are there pro- or anti-development groups? How have local boards and commissions reacted in the past?

### ☐ Collect information about existing energy infrastructure development.

Start by understanding what development has already occurred in your community. Are there existing LSS or other energy generation sources, such as wind projects or gas wells or plants, or other large infrastructure like concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs)? Consider any projects in development, permitted, or nearing permitting. Have solar or wind developers already approached residents?

The U.S. Large-Scale Solar Photovoltaic Database (USPVDB) and the U.S. Wind Turbine Database (USWTDB) can provide insights into nearby wind and LSS projects. The U.S. Energy Information Administration Form-860 data can also be useful for finding energy projects that will soon be online, and the grid operator in many regions might map where interconnection requests have been made, indicating that solar developers are considering LSS projects.

### ☐ Gauge attitudes from news, social media, and government meeting minutes.

In addition to speaking with friends, neighbors, and local officials, you can learn a lot about people's attitudes and concerns by reading local news articles, reviewing government meeting minutes and agendas, and browsing social media posts—there may also be organized groups communicating online.

Consider reaching out to community-based organizations or other representatives of marginalized groups for their perspectives. This may also be a good time to begin forming a local advisory group (Step 3). Recognize that some people or groups may face constraints in expressing their questions and concerns.

**WHEN IS A GOOD TIME FOR A CONVERSATION ABOUT SOLAR?**

**The best time to discuss solar development is now!** While we encourage proactive planning and conversations before LSS development has started, that's not always possible. Many communities are already responding to operational LSS projects, those in permitting phases, or developer outreach. The first step in preparing for a conversation is identifying your community's current stage of development.

## ☐ Consider surveying or interviewing community members.

Depending on your resources, you might consider deploying more intensive methods to identify residents' key questions, concerns, and attitudes. This could involve a community survey, like the one used in our Michigan pilot (see the Resource Library for the survey instrument). Your state's planning association or a local college or university may help draft and distribute an online survey. Partnering with municipal or county governments can help with distribution, but be mindful that involving local officials might make the conversation appear politically motivated to some residents.

If feasible, consider also holding focus groups or one-on-one interviews, as done in our Wisconsin pilot (see the Resource Library for details). Engaging residents who live near potential development locations, such as those near transmission lines, substations, or large open or agricultural land, could provide valuable insights. A mixed-method approach is recommended, as each method provides unique insights and outcomes, but this requires additional resources. If resources are limited, it is still possible to hold an effective meeting without conducting surveys or interviews.

## ☐ Identify and access publicly available datasets.

There may be existing datasets that provide relevant information on demographics and land use in your community. The U.S. Census Bureau offers a wealth of information, and the USDA provides rural land use details such as the number of acres in production and types of crops grown. Headwaters Economics provides easy-to-access socioeconomic data and community profiles. Additionally, local or county planning associations, planning commission members, and University Extension specialists may assist in identifying and analyzing datasets. Finally, the grid operator in many regions also maps where solar developers are considering LSS projects.[2]

### Siting Policies and Permitting Authorities by State

Primary authority for large scale, land-based solar and wind project siting for U.S. States and Puerto Rico

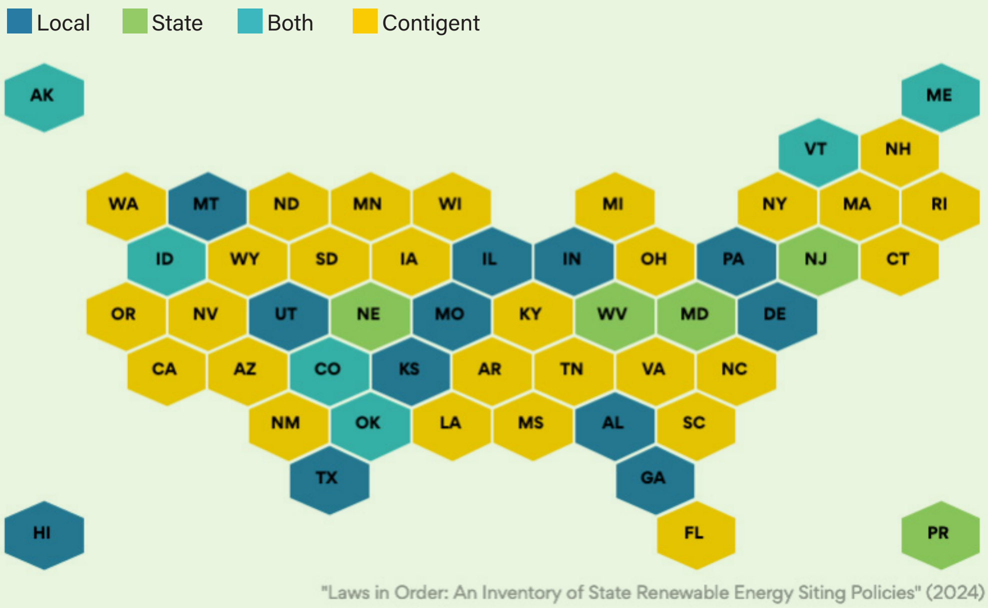



**Figure 1.** This figure shows the primary authority for LSS and large-scale wind project siting and permitting across the US. More information on these policies can be found in LBNL's Laws in Order report. Note that policies can differ within a single jurisdiction across different forms.

2 This map may help you learn which regional grid operator serves your community. While the availability of data varies between operators, you can sometimes find information about the location of proposed energy projects in the operator's "interconnection queue."

## ☐ Understand the policy environment and constraints.

Assessing the policy contexts and constraints within which LSS development may occur is essential. State and local contexts for LSS development vary. In some areas, municipalities and counties control LSS permitting, while in others, state boards hold this authority. Other regions have mixed or contingent control, where project size dictates the extent of local control over permitting and siting (see Figure 1 for your state's primary authority for LSS siting). These laws define what local officials and residents can control—or influence—in the solar development process. While the outcomes of permitting processes can often be influenced, the process itself is less flexible. Understanding how any conversation you initiate may integrate with existing permitting, approval processes, or upcoming ordinance votes is vital. For example, by clarifying the balance of state and local control, facilitators of the pilot conversation in Wisconsin were able to guide a realistic, grounded, and pragmatic discussion about the potential local influence and tradeoffs of solar development.

### ACKNOWLEDGE THAT POLICIES CHANGE

In 2023, Osceola County, Michigan, lacked county-wide zoning, though some townships had their own zoning. A new law, PA 233, set to take effect in November 2024, would change the siting and permitting authority for large-scale solar, wind, and battery energy storage systems. The impending law complicated the Osceola County pilot conversation, as the law's exact impact was unclear, making the drafting of ordinances seem challenging. In this shifting policy environment, the conversation could have felt unproductive.

Instead, the MSU Extension facilitator and guest speakers took the time to explain how PA 233 might impact the roles of residents and local officials. By being transparent and forthcoming about both the current state and potential changes, the facilitators not only built trust with the community but also turned what could have seemed like a futile conversation into a productive and meaningful exchange.

*Ground-mounted LSS with pollinator garden. Photo by Rob Davis.*

## Step 2: Define the Purpose of Your Community Conversation

### 2-3 months prior to hosting a conversation

*After assessing your community's LSS status and understanding the policy environment, the next step in planning a community conversation is to define its purpose. While our purpose was, "to help community members better understand, communicate, influence, and align LSS development with their values, interests, and priorities," yours may differ. Whatever it is, be sure to put it in writing.*

*Are you looking to inform a planning process, answer questions from local officials or developers, provide a forum for residents to share perspectives, or offer information to landowners about leasing opportunities? Perhaps residents want an update on an existing project's location or status. Draft a clear statement outlining what you hope to achieve.*

*Your purpose will also depend on the timing of solar development and your community's policy and permitting processes. Conversations early in a project's life cycle may focus on cost, size, or environmental impact, while those in communities with existing projects may center on resident experiences and future improvements.*

### ☐ Articulate desired outcomes and deliverables.

In addition to articulating the purpose of your conversation, consider what outcomes and deliverables you want to generate as a result. Will your conversation generate a list of questions or recommendations for a developer or planning board? Will it articulate a broader vision for how LSS development aligns, or conflicts, with your community's goals? Remember, some outcomes may require multiple meetings and significant effort, like building relationships and maintaining communication—so be realistic about your resources and time. Regardless, clarifying the outcomes and deliverables now will help you articulate to participants why they are needed and what they can expect after the meetings (Step 8).

### ☐ Anticipate potential questions.

Also consider the types of questions community members are asking (Step 1). This will help you plan the topics to cover in your meeting(s), which might include:

- What do LSS projects look like?
- How does LSS compare to other forms of solar energy, such as cost and intermittency?
- How are LSS projects sited and permitted?
- What type of land is best suited for LSS?
- How are LSS projects built, operated, and eventually decommissioned?
- How safe are LSS and large-scale battery storage and what emergency procedures are in place?
- What are the positive and negative social, environmental, and economic impacts of LSS?
- Taking into account the policy environment (Step 1), how can community members influence the design, approval process, and economic benefits of a proposed project?

## ☐ Stay realistic and focused.

With your purpose and topics in mind, you might feel apprehensive about leading a discussion on LSS development, especially if you lack technical expertise. This is normal! We also needed assistance in our pilot projects and couldn't answer all questions in the moment—nor can we answer them all now, as many are context-specific.[3]

Consider whether your conversation will focus on local issues and how residents can influence development within existing policy constraints, or if it will extend to broader discussions on the role and impacts of solar energy at the state or national level. Be cautious about the latter; in our experience, broader conversations often prove challenging to navigate and tend not to foster meaningful dialogue. Either way, you'll likely need help understanding and communicating technical information about solar, as well as legal and land-use requirements. See below for guidance on whom to contact for assistance.

## ☐ Consider your target audience and keep the meetings public.

Determine your target audience, as this will guide how you set the agenda (Step 3), and conduct outreach and marketing (Step 6). In our pilot programs, we aimed for inclusivity, inviting all community members in the county. You may want a narrower focus, such as residents of a specific area or those with strong opinions—whether supportive or critical—about solar energy.

Regardless of your target audience, we strongly recommend keeping the meetings public.[4] Although a closed-door meeting might appeal to residents who feel uncomfortable speaking publicly, research shows that inclusivity and transparency are critical to perceptions of fairness. Our public meetings, though geared toward community members, also provided opportunities for local officials, utility personnel, and even solar developers to join and contribute to the discussion.

**MAPPING AND MODELING CAN BE COMPLICATED—PROCEED WITH CAUTION!**

Participatory mapping activities in our pilot conversations required significant time and preparation. Without careful planning, these activities risked confusing participants. While mapping can be a valuable tool in LSS development, it is challenging to integrate effectively into community conversations, particularly when the goal is to identify potential solar siting locations. The process is inherently complex and often requires specialized expertise, including input from developers.

In Michigan, the pilot team used mapping to capture community preferences for LSS siting, focusing on identifying marginal lands and open areas suitable for solar development. However, the mapping model narrowed the scope to specific properties and small tracts. Many participants felt uncomfortable marking exact locations during the conversation.

With additional time and resources, the team instead could have printed a map that included transmission lines and substations, allowing participants to use highlighters and sticky notes to share their insights more comfortably.

3 We recommend recording people's questions and responding after the meeting concludes. This provides time for you to think, research, and reach out to others for help.

4 It may not be possible for all of your initial planning meetings, especially those with a local advisory board (Step 3), to be public. For convenience, it might make more sense to hold those meetings privately.

## ☐ Briefly outline your resources and constraints.

Before diving deeper, take a quick inventory of available resources and those you may need to host a successful conversation. Are you managing the process alone or do you have the help of a team with various skills and expertise? Can you run the meeting yourself or will you need to hire a trained facilitator? What financial resources do you have? Will you fund the process yourself or will you need to raise funds?[5]

Do you have a venue in mind or will you need to find or rent one? How many meetings will you need? Do you require facilitators for small-group discussions? How much time do you have? Do you need to coordinate with other community events or a pending LSS proposal? We'll discuss these questions in more detail later in the guide, but a quick sketch of your resources and constraints now will help refine your purpose.

### MANAGING COSTS

The financial cost of conducting community conversations can vary significantly. According to our pilot partners, a simple, straightforward conversation can cost as little as $100-$200, especially if you and your dedicated organizers are willing to volunteer your time, use a local venue for free, and handle marketing, without needing to pay for guest speakers or a facilitator. In this case, your only expenses would be for food—which could be cookies and lemonade—and some miscellaneous supplies and printing.

Costs rise as you expand the scope of the conversation. At the high end, you could budget between $3,000 and $5,000. This assumes holding the event at a venue like the county fairgrounds or a hotel (with room rentals ranging from $100 to $350), providing a catered or buffet dinner ($400-$500 per event), and hiring an experienced facilitator ($1,000-$3,000 per meeting). If you need to cover travel and honoraria for guest speakers, expect to budget an additional $500 to $1,000 per speaker, with higher costs if speakers need to be flown in.[6]

Personnel costs, which include paying people to plan, organize, and run the conversations, are typically the largest expense. If you need to pay individuals to build and meet with a local advisory group, assess the status of LSS and other developments, create agendas, market the event (through flyers and digital advertising), analyze data from surveys, and write reports or develop a website, these tasks require significant time and resources. Our partners suggested that a hired planning firm could charge between $10,000 and $20,000 to run a series of meetings.

*Photo by Rahael Cruz (Unsplash).*

5 Don't worry too much about financial resources at this stage. Our pilot partners suggest that a conversation can be held for minimum expense with some creativity.

6 One consideration is whether to offer a financial incentive to attendees, such as compensating them for their participation. We have not included a cost estimate, as we have reservations about this approach (Step 6).

## Step 3: Establish a Local Advisory Group

### 3 months prior to hosting a conversation

*Forming a local advisory group is essential to assess the status of LSS development and understand your community's policy environment. The advisory group can also help identify topics and process elements for your meeting, contribute relevant skills or expertise, connect you with additional stakeholders, and ultimately help publicize your meeting. A strong group will also be invaluable for managing local project logistics (such as venues, food, and meeting locations) and navigating local relationships and politics. We recommend including individuals from diverse stakeholder groups, such as residents and historically marginalized groups like renters, to ensure that your conversation includes a wide range of perspectives.*

### ☐ Include at least one local elected or appointed official in your advisory group.

Including at least one local elected or appointed official, such as a member of the planning commission or zoning board, is highly recommended. An official known for being open-minded and committed to listening to community members can add legitimacy to your conversation and enhance its impact. Ideally, select an official who has experience with wind or solar permitting processes. Your local government website should provide the contact information you need to reach out.

In addition to local officials, consider including stakeholders from the following groups:

- Residents, including both long-term and short-term renters
- Land-use planners, such as those from state, regional, or county planning commissions or the American Planning Association
- Local or state Farm Bureau chapter representatives
- Utility personnel
- Community foundation representatives
- Historic preservationists
- Business leaders or local Chamber of Commerce representatives
- Wildlife conservation and hunting groups
- Farmers, both landowners and renters
- Large landowners

#### ADVISORY GROUP ORGANIZATION AND STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

An effective advisory group should include four to seven members. Start by creating a spreadsheet to track potential members, noting their roles, interests, and contact details. Use this tool to note people interested in public meetings or who could serve as resources (e.g., utilities), even if they can't join the group.

Regularly ask, "Who isn't here that should be?" to ensure diverse perspectives and fill gaps in expertise.

To identify key community members, consider a Stakeholder Mapping Exercise (or Audience and Stakeholder Analysis). This method uses a simple matrix to plot impact/interest against influence, helping prioritize participants with significant stakes, even if their influence is minimal.

- Soil Conservation Service or **Natural Resources Conservation Service** (NRCS) personnel
- University Extension agents or faculty members

These groups represent key constituencies or provide connections to them. It's essential to clarify whether individuals are participating in an official capacity, representing their group, or more informally, offering a unique or underrepresented perspective or technical expertise. Some of these groups may also assist by facilitating or presenting at your public meetings.

## ☐ Hire or enlist an experienced facilitator.

In addition to including key stakeholder groups, you'll want to involve someone experienced in facilitating group deliberative processes. If you don't have facilitation experience yourself, consider hiring a skilled facilitator or finding a local facilitator willing to volunteer. An experienced facilitator can help align the conversation with your goals and community planning objectives.

While the facilitator doesn't need to be a member of your advisory group, involving them early will help identify specific process points, such as how to handle particular issues thoughtfully. Note that not all facilitators are adept at planning extended deliberative processes; some are better at running meetings, while others excel at both.

**STYLE MATTERS**

If you plan to hire a facilitator, research their approach and philosophy. Ideally, select someone with experience in helping groups identify and achieve common goals. Facilitators specializing in dispute or conflict resolution may not be the best fit for this type of gathering. Mediators experienced in multi-party public issues, however, should be well-suited to handle controversy and debate effectively.

## ☐ Enlist an individual with administrative support skills.

To ensure that both advisory group meetings and community conversations run smoothly, you'll want to engage someone with administrative experience. This person can record meeting minutes, enter qualitative data, create social media posts, design flyers, communicate with local contacts, and manage meeting logistics, including tracking comments and questions from participants. Having administrative support will be critical to the success of your event.

*Lapeer Solar Park. Photo by Bradley Neumann (Michigan State University).*

### ☐ Carefully consider the right role for developers and utility representatives at your event.

A key challenge in our pilot conversations was determining how to include developers and utility representatives. While the meetings are open to the public, formally including developers as experts, speakers, or advisory group members can create tensions. If they do attend, it's important for the facilitator or a trusted official to acknowledge their presence and clarify that they are available to answer technical questions upon request. Facilitators should similarly acknowledge participants (such as developers or land use planners) who are not affiliated with the project planning but can provide technical knowledge.

While developers and utilities offer valuable expertise and are essential to community-centered solar development, our research suggests that they are often not trusted by residents. Their formal inclusion can risk distorting the perception of the conversation's purpose. Residents may worry that the meeting is being used to promote large-scale solar projects or "make life easier" for developers. As a result, it's important to be cautious about how their involvement affects trust and dynamics.

**DEVELOPER PARTICIPATION IN WISCONSIN**

In Wisconsin, during a community conversation coinciding with an LSS development, the developer attended as a technical resource. They agreed to answer project questions privately after the meeting. Extension staff clarified that the meeting's purpose was to learn about community priorities to help shape future projects, not to discuss the current development. That approach worked well.

That said, developers are not all the same. Some work to build positive relationships with host communities. Their involvement can be beneficial and excluding them entirely can increase the risk of conflict later. Without being part of the conversation, developers may miss key concerns and misunderstand local values, which can lead to tensions down the road.

Before deciding on developer participation, it's important to discuss their role with your advisory group. Balancing transparency and community concerns can help ensure a more collaborative, effective process.

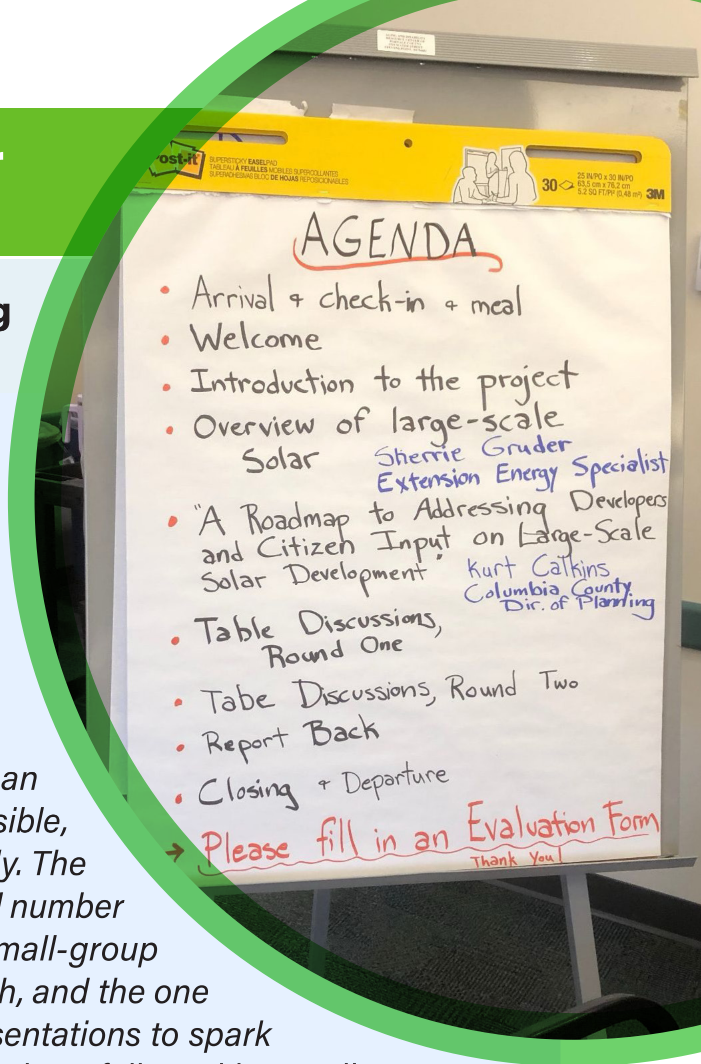
*Photo by Fatimah Bolhassan (University of Michigan).*

## Step 4: Create an Agenda for Your Community Conversation

### 1.5 months prior to hosting a conversation

*A successful community conversation, like any well-run meeting, requires a detailed agenda. We used a similar agenda in all five of our pilot conversations, and an example is included in the Resource Library. Rather than specify exact processes and timing here, we outline key topics, insights, and suggestions to consider as you build your own agenda.*

*Engaging with participants is far more effective than speaking at them. Prioritize discussion wherever possible, and tailor the structure of your meetings accordingly. The purpose of your meeting should guide the length and number of presentations, as well as the time allotted for small-group discussions and Q&A sessions. A common approach, and the one taken in each pilot community, is to begin with presentations to spark ideas and provide consistent information to all attendees, followed by small group roundtable discussions.*




### ☐ Use small groups and roundtables to increase inclusivity.

While larger full-room discussions may seem expedient, small-group formats—such as roundtables—can enhance topic diversity, participant engagement, discussion depth, and control over dominant voices. Ideally (resources permitting), assign one staff member, trained facilitator, intern, or volunteer to record and report the discussion at each table or provide a summary afterward. Avoid asking participants to take on these tasks, as it may place them in uncomfortable positions and reinforce potentially harmful power dynamics. Be mindful that comprehensive summaries from each group can become lengthy as attendance grows, so have a plan for managing this.

### ☐ Select relevant topics for presentations and roundtable discussions.

Assuming you will have some combination of presentations and/or small group discussions, picking topics is important. The topics you choose should align with the purpose of your conversation (Step 2) and the local context (Step 1). Rather than prescribing specific topics, we recommend tailoring your selections based on your understanding of local solar energy development, relevant policies, input from your advisory group and stakeholders, surveys or focus groups you conduct, and existing community priorities or planning efforts.

*The posted agenda at the community conversation. Photo by Jacob While (Michigan State University).*

Below are examples of presentation and roundtable discussion topics that proved relevant in our pilot communities. Multiple topics can often be combined into a single presentation. The LBNL Community-Centered Solar Development (CCSD) website provides several helpful resources—including this guidebook—that could be used to develop or inform topics.

**Potential Presentation Topics:**

- **Solar resource potential** (e.g., nationally or regionally)
- **Existing solar installations** (e.g., nationally or regionally)
- **Trends in solar development** (e.g., cost comparisons, deployment rates, policy decisions, tax credits, project size, "fair-share" arguments)
- **Types and scales of solar** (e.g., rooftop, ground-mounted, community, brownfield, utility-scale, agrivoltaics)
- **Solar and farmland preservation** (e.g., food vs. fuel debate, agricultural economy, wildlife habitat, alternative development, farm livelihood, rural aesthetics)
- **Zoning and landowner decisions** (e.g. local vs. state permitting and policy, land leasing considerations)

**Potential Roundtable Discussion Topics:**

- **Residents' concerns and tradeoffs associated with LSS projects** (e.g., land use, agricultural impacts, viewshed impacts, environmental and wildlife impacts)
- **Participants' visions for solar's role in the community,** (e.g., alignment with long term goals)
- **Community influence over LSS project characteristics** (e.g., screening, setbacks, decommissioning)
- **Negotiation tactics for the community and individuals with developers**
- **Community input to state permitting boards** (e.g., LSS impacts relative to the goals of the comprehensive plan)
- **Community revenue use** (e.g., priority uses for annual revenue generated from LSS projects)


## ☐ Focus on local community.

Although mentioning national trends provides local context, focusing on broad-level solar policy can distract from achievable goals. Instead, we suggest focusing your event on local solar development, which the pilots found to be more effective and relatable. Discussing county or township projects can keep the conversation grounded and actionable. While broader policy questions may arise and should be documented, focusing on what's achievable given the time resources available makes for a more productive discussion.

*Michigan community conversation. Photo by Jacob White (Michigan State University).*

## ☐ Clarify how people can (and cannot) influence change.

Attendees want to know how they can make an impact. While local governments do not control solar land use regulations in all states, even where approval is state-level, there may still be opportunities for public input. Our work and a 2024 survey of renewable energy developers suggest several areas where residents may influence projects, including vegetative screening, excluding properties, setbacks, compensation, decommissioning, community benefits agreements, and revenue use. It's important to clarify these avenues during your conversation.

## ☐ Select credible guest speakers.

Selecting credible, knowledgeable speakers is essential. According to our National LSS Neighbor Survey, trusted sources include local residents living near energy projects, non-profits, community organizations, and university faculty, staff, and Extension representatives. In contrast, energy developers and state and federal government officials tend to be viewed with more skepticism. Ensure that speakers are prepared to deliver accurate, balanced information and are comfortable acknowledging when they don't have an answer. Extension staff, with their expertise in science communication, can be especially valuable.

### SPEAKER-AUDIENCE RAPPORT

Dr. Sarah Mills and Kurt Calkins, guest speakers at two of our pilot projects, both provided excellent examples of how to introduce their work, history, and unique perspectives. Dr. Mills began by establishing her expertise and explaining her personal history. While not a local *per se*, she grew up on a farm in a similar community and focused her dissertation research on farmland preservation. She also set the tone for the presentation early by saying, "If you're pro-solar, I'm going to say some things that upset you. If you're against solar, I'm going to say some things that upset you. By the end of the night you'll likely all be upset at me. But don't worry, I have thick skin." We noted a collective sigh of relief among the crowd following this statement. You can watch Dr. Mills introduce her presentation here. Her presentation materials are in the Resource Library.

At the beginning of his presentation in Wisconsin, Kurt Caulkins provided his credentials for speaking about LSS. Not only did he highlight his professional experience (32 years in local planning in Wisconsin), but he also made clear his ties to the local community and rural area. He spoke about how he spends his free time fishing with his wife in their Wisconsin cabin.

These introductions are crucial for building rapport with the audience. However, it's important to remember that such connections may resonate more with certain groups (e.g., farmers or fishers). Therefore, the content of speakers' presentations must remain objective and evidence-based. Speakers should focus on presenting the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence, regardless of their position.

*Wisconsin community conversation. Photo by Jacob White (Michigan State University).*

## ☐ Prepare for "Frequently Asked Questions."

Over time, we've gathered a list of frequently asked questions that you might encounter, provided in the Resource Library. Review these with your advisory group to determine which ones to address proactively. For others, be prepared to respond during the Q&A, but be transparent if you can't answer every question on the spot. Be sure that participants know you are recording all of the questions asked and commit to following up post-meeting on unanswered questions.

## ☐ Use "it depends" for complex answers.

Many questions have nuanced answers, depending on factors like location, policy, and project design. It is often appropriate to say "it depends" and provide a range of outcomes or examples. Being honest about uncertainties helps build credibility and avoids perceptions of bias.

Many times, these questions arise not from idle curiosity but because the asker has a preconceived notion of the answer. It can be helpful to present worst- and best-case scenarios. For example, to answer a question about local job creation, you could reference the many jobs created during the construction phase of the project while acknowledging that operational projects produce very few long-term jobs in the host community.

## ☐ Ask for written or submitted questions instead of hosting an open-mic night.

In our pilot conversations, it became clear that providing attendees with the chance to ask questions is essential. However, open-mic sessions often led to comments rather than questions. Instead, we found it more effective to have attendees submit questions in writing—such as on 3x5 cards collected by a staff member or facilitator. Reading and recording these questions (and comments) aloud still allows for gauging what matters most to community members. If time does not permit answering all questions during the session, having them in writing enables follow-up responses afterward. This can be done by providing written replies or recommending organizations or individuals better suited to respond.

## ☐ Establish expectations and ground rules.

Begin by setting ground rules for respectful discussion, with input from your advisory group on enforcement. This helps maintain a productive atmosphere and ensures that all participants feel comfortable engaging.

In our pilots, we were clear that our conversations were not a forum to debate whether solar power is appropriate. Instead, our conversations focused on:

- How to best align development with your community's goals
- Residents' concerns and questions and how we can best address them
- Opportunities for residents to provide input or influence how solar projects are developed in the community
- Financial and/or other community benefits residents would like to see from local solar projects

*Photo by American Public Power Association (Unsplash).*

Should disruptions arise, facilitators can remind individuals of the established ground rules. Continued disruption may result in those individuals being asked to leave. For further guidance on creating ground rules that foster respectful, open, and constructive dialogue, refer to the University of Minnesota Extension's suggestions for working agreements for productive discussions.

### ☐ Have a local leader set the stage.

Conversations about solar energy can become heated and sometimes veer off track in ways you didn't intend. Our work shows that one effective way to ensure a productive meeting is to enlist a trusted local leader—ideally someone charismatic—to set the tone and help keep residents respectful and focused. These individuals could include civic leaders, former local officials, business leaders, or Extension agents. While they need not be a facilitator, they should understand the goals of the meeting, commit to impartial language, and ideally be part of the advisory group. As noted in Step 3, it is important to have an experienced facilitator run the meeting, but the local leader can play a crucial supporting role.

### ☐ Conduct an exit survey.

An exit survey provides valuable feedback for improving future community conversations and offers participants a chance to share lingering questions, comments, requests, or compliments. It also helps gather additional information for summarizing and reporting back to respondents. Both Google Forms and paper surveys are effective formats, though the medium can influence response rates—digital surveys may reach a broader audience, while paper surveys may encourage participation from those less comfortable with technology.

The exit survey from our Kossuth County, Iowa pilot is available in the Resource Library.

*A solar array outside the community conversation in Wisconsin. Photo by Jacob White (Michigan State University).*

## Step 5: Select an Appropriate Date, Venue, and Duration for Your Conversation

### 1.5 months prior to hosting a conversation

*With a grasp of LSS development in your community, a local advisory group established, and an agenda created, it's time to consider the timing, location, and length of your conversation. Below are guidelines for selecting dates and booking a venue effectively.*

### ☐ Choose days, times, and dates when participants are likely to be available.

Across our pilots and most community meetings, older residents, often retired, comprise a significant portion of attendees. To foster greater diversity of perspectives, it's important to consider individuals who may face attendance constraints, such as working parents or those without reliable transportation. Weeknights and Saturday mornings are generally preferable to events scheduled during work hours. Avoid scheduling on Sundays, holidays, or during other major community events, government meetings, and sporting events. Additionally, be mindful of the agricultural calendar—avoid scheduling during crop planting and harvest seasons, especially if you want to engage local farmers.

Consult with your advisory group to identify potential scheduling conflicts and determine the best days and times for community members. Ensure there is sufficient lead time (a few weeks to a few months) for advertising, allowing residents ample time to plan and make arrangements, such as childcare. Better yet, consider offering compensation for childcare or providing it on-site to further facilitate participation.

Consider the duration of your conversation, as well. Pilot conversations ranged from 90 minutes to three hours (with breaks). If the goal is to share information and host a Q&A on LSS, a shorter meeting may suffice. For more in-depth engagement—such as informing a permitting process, discussing community benefit plans, or conducting a visioning process—you may need a longer or multi-meeting format.

### ☐ Select a venue that is accessible for participants.

Choosing the best venue for community conversations can be more complex than expected. You might select a location close to areas most impacted by LSS development, which are often the more rural parts of a county. However, a venue closer to population centers may attract more attendees. Recognize that attendees may vary by location, with some groups more supportive or opposed to solar than others. Hosting sessions in multiple locations can help address these differences.

Public facilities known to county residents are generally preferable to private ones. Avoid spaces co-located with police departments or jails. Schools or educational facilities are convenient for parents, often providing space for children to play—but ensure there are adult-sized tables and chairs available. Also, verify that the venue can accommodate your program needs, such as a stage or podium for presenters and a projector. All of our pilot meetings involved small-group discussions around round tables seating 6-8 people, but many venues only have rectangular tables. Ensure there's enough room for people to move about, especially those with mobility needs.

Acoustics are another important consideration, both for audio amplification during presentations and arranging seating to minimize interference during small-group discussions. If possible, the venue should have a registration area outside the main meeting room to reduce disruptions, as well as space for youth activities.

Make sure visual aids are clearly visible. Portable projectors and screens can be hard to see from a distance or due to room lighting, so test visibility from various angles and, if needed, provide printed materials like slide decks, especially for participants with visual impairments. Ensure the venue is accessible in other ways—check for appropriate lighting for evening meetings, wheelchair ramps, and accessible restrooms.

If virtual meetings are common in your community, it's fine to offer this option. However, from our experience, in-person meetings are much more productive in achieving the goals of community conversations. Further, if you're struggling to get subject matter experts to attend in person, you can certainly consider Zooming them in—this is perfectly acceptable, but it should be used as a supplement rather than a replacement for face-to-face interaction.

### ☐ Provide food.

Regardless of whether the meeting occurs in the evening or on a weekend morning, it is a good idea to make sure that the venue you choose allows for food and beverages, and that they will accept local caterers. Serving meals increases the cost of meetings, but also ensures that those participants who lack the time or resources to eat before your conversation will be active and engaged. If you can't afford to provide full meals, consider providing coffee, soft drinks, and snacks. Finally, be aware of people's different dietary preferences or restrictions; provide vegan and vegetarian options. If you're pre-registering guests, ask about any dietary restrictions.


*Food options at the community conversations in Iowa (left) and Maryland (right). Photos by Jacob White (Michigan State University).*

## Step 6: Engage in Outreach and Market Your Conversation

### At least 1 month prior to hosting a conversation

*With the date and venue selected for your community conversation, it's time to invite participants.*

### ☐ Publicize the event widely to maximize diverse perspectives and experiences.

These community conversations are intended to be open, inclusive, public events, so aim to reach out to as many people as possible. Research shows that residents within a one-mile perimeter of a solar project tend to be more engaged and concerned about its impacts. However, renewable energy development affects a much wider range of community members than just nearby residents. Consider, for instance, the community surrounding a coal plant that may close due to a new solar project. They might also want to be involved in the conversation. Similar to the advisory group, reach out to a range of stakeholders, including local officials, business leaders, the agricultural community (e.g., farmers, landowners, farm suppliers), and historically underrepresented groups, such as renters and people of color.[7] Use the stakeholder mapping exercise described in Step 3 to identify others to invite.

Digital advertising, including flyers and social media posts, can work well, but not all residents, especially in rural areas, have reliable internet access. Additional options include postcard announcements, door-knocking, local media, and press releases. Advertising on local radio and in newspapers or making announcements at public meetings can also help. For instance, one pilot partner in Iowa found that advertising on two AM radio stations in the county boosted attendance.

Engage with local schoolteachers (they often know everyone), school administrators, and community and farm organizations. Word-of-mouth works well, so ensure that well-connected community members know about your meeting. Local advisory group members, officials, or county Extension agents are great resources for where and how to advertise. Finally, keep in mind that direct mailings may not reach renters, absentee landlords, and tenant farmers.

### ☐ Inform those most interested and affected.

Ask the local advisory group to identify community segments who are either interested in leasing land to solar developers or likely to be affected by development. Seek communication channels to reach those groups. If prior research (e.g., interviews, focus groups, surveys) on community perceptions of solar has been conducted, invite participants from those activities to attend. Be sure to reach out to residents near any existing and proposed solar project sites.

7 Be aware that successfully including historically marginalized and underrepresented groups requires a significant commitment of resources and time, sometimes spent building or repairing relationships.

## ☐ Organize a table of target populations, outreach channels, and considerations.

Building a table to track outreach activities can be helpful. This table could identify target populations (e.g., neighbors near solar development, environmental and energy groups, farmers), potential outreach channels, and key considerations for each group. The table below serves as a starting point, but your advisory group and stakeholder mapping from Step 3 can further customize it to fit your community. Start this early to ensure comprehensive outreach.

| Target population | Channels with greatest reach | Considerations |
|---|---|---|
| **Nearby neighbors** | ▪ Postcard announcement | ▪ Addresses can be found in tax rolls<br>▪ Consider absentee landlords—will you mail to the landowner tax address or to the physical address? |
| **Residents in general area** | ▪ Extension websites<br>▪ Local media (press and radio)<br>▪ Social media posts with website links for more information<br>▪ Flyers posted in local businesses<br>▪ Community organizations<br>▪ Announcements at public meetings | ▪ These methods may not reach specific, hard-to-reach populations<br>▪ While advertising through social media can be inexpensive, it excludes those who lack internet access |
| **High school and college students** | ▪ Social media posts with website links for more information<br>▪ Environmental or farming organizations<br>▪ High school and college club leaders | ▪ These students have a stake in the future but may have scheduling and transportation difficulties that get in the way of attending events |
| **Environmental and energy groups** | ▪ Champions from within the organization<br>▪ Organization listservs | ▪ While not always hyper-local, these organizational representatives can provide a more global perspective |
| **Farmers and agricultural service businesses** | ▪ Agriculture organizations<br>▪ Farm radio<br>▪ Trusted vendors or consultants | ▪ Printed flyers at ag supply stores and coffee shops or gas stations can be useful |
| **Agricultural workers** | ▪ Trusted members of labor community | ▪ Outreach materials may need to be developed in a non-English language (Spanish, Hmong) |
| **Extension offices** | ▪ University and Extension website | ▪ Extension personnel may also be able to present or answer questions at your event |

## ☐ Choose a title that signals discussion on LSS tradeoffs.

In Michigan, a pilot conversation was titled, “The Good, the Bad, and the Tradeoffs for Large Scale Solar.” Cornell Extension in New York used, “Interested in Getting Involved with Large Scale Solar Development in Your Community? Come Share Your Questions, Insights, and Concerns!” Balanced titles like these encourage a range of residents, whether cautious or enthusiastic about LSS, to attend.

## ☐ Include essential information in your advertising.

Clearly communicate the event's date, time, and location in your advertising. If multiple meetings are scheduled, make sure to share the locations of all meetings in advance to prevent concerns about specific groups or regions being excluded. If food will be provided, be sure to mention that as well. While including a weblink for additional details can be helpful, keep in mind that not everyone will have access to the internet.

Consider whether to ask attendees to register for your event.  On one hand, registration helps estimate attendance, which is especially useful if you're providing food or other incentives. It also allows you to track who is local and who has traveled from farther away, helping you identify participants most likely to be impacted by development. Registration can provide this information, or you can use a sign-in sheet at the event to collect names, addresses, and reasons for attending. On the other hand, registration can create a barrier to participation if it feels too complicated. In our pilot conversations, we found that the number of people who registered and actually attended varied significantly—some who registered didn't attend, and some who attended didn't register.

Example promotional materials from previous pilots are available in the Resource Library.

## ☐ Consider providing incentives.

Attendance varied across pilot conversations, with Michigan and Wisconsin—where financial incentives were offered—having higher attendance. Financial incentives, like gift cards, travel allowances, or childcare support, may make attendance more appealing, but it's unclear if they were the primary attendance drivers, as those locations had strong community outreach or active solar projects that drew interest.

Offering incentives can increase meeting costs and affect perceptions of legitimacy, as some may view it as "paying off" participants. However, incentives can make it easier for people who might not otherwise attend and some philanthropic organizations and government programs are interested in funding meetings of this type.

**CONSIDER REGISTERING ATTENDEES FOR MULTIPLE MEETINGS SIMULTANEOUSLY**

To simplify registration, consider combining options for multiple meetings into a single form. Here's an example of how Michigan and Wisconsin handled this:

In Michigan, two sequential meetings were designed as a series, with each session building on the previous one. However, some participants mistakenly believed that attending one session either meant they couldn't attend the other, or that signing up for one session automatically registered them for both.

In Wisconsin, by contrast, two identical meetings were offered on different nights in different locations, and attendees were clearly instructed to select just one session based on their availability.

Offering a single registration form with an option to select one or both sessions can help reduce confusion.

## Step 7: Conduct Your Conversation

### The day of your conversation

*Today is the day! It's time to host your community conversation. You've put a lot of effort into preparing for this moment, so remember: while something unexpected may happen, you've organized and planned thoroughly. Trust in your preparations!*

### ☐ Prepare for arrival, set-up, and greeting participants.

Coordinate arrival details with your venue ahead of time, and plan to arrive at least two hours early to set up and ensure everything is ready. The exact arrival time may vary depending on the event logistics, but it's essential to be prepared, as some attendees might arrive early. Confirm if the venue will handle the food and drinks or if you'll need to set those up yourself.

Set up a greeting and registration table in an obvious location near the venue entrance well before the designated start time. This table will serve as a central spot for collecting participants' information via a sign-in sheet, distributing conversation materials, assisting with reimbursements or incentives, and providing exit surveys. It's also helpful to answer logistical questions, such as the locations of bathrooms or information on food allergies.


*The registration table at the community conversation in Michigan. Photo by Jacob White (Michigan State University).*

## ☐ Stick to the agenda.

Adhering to your planned agenda is essential for a successful community conversation. Following the agenda keeps the meeting on time and helps minimize disruptions. Meetings that run long tend to make attendees irritable. If a presentation is scheduled for 45 minutes, ensure that the speaker stays within that time. Don't hesitate to politely keep them on track. Likewise, if you've scheduled a five-minute break, allow precisely five minutes, but no longer.

Avoid making last-minute changes to the agenda during the meeting. In our pilots, second-guessing the plan often led to confusion. If an aspect of the agenda didn't work as hoped, take note for the next conversation rather than altering it on the spot. Sticking to your agenda demonstrates your preparation and control, which reduces the likelihood of participants disrupting or delaying the meeting.[8]

## ☐ Handle disruptions quickly and confidently.

Disruptions were rare during our pilot conversations, with only one instance of a combative outburst. Setting expectations early helps minimize these disruptions. If someone does interrupt, handle it quickly, confidently, and professionally. Politely remind the participant that, by attending, they agreed to the meeting expectations and ground rules. Assure them that you're interested in hearing their perspective, but ask them to wait until the Q&A session or roundtable discussion. If they persist, let them know that they're being disrespectful to others and depriving other attendees of their opportunity to speak. If necessary, politely but confidently ask the individual to leave and wait for them to do so. Do not try to talk over them.

For larger, organized disruptions, familiarize yourself with your venue's rules. Some venues may permit law enforcement presence, while others may not. Although some partners and local advisory group members have considered having a sheriff's deputy or police presence, this can be counterproductive. While some attendees might feel safer, others—particularly historically marginalized communities—may view this presence as intimidating. A good compromise might be to ask an off-duty officer to attend in plain clothes, ensuring that they are identifiable yet less imposing.

## ☐ Close the conversation and articulate next steps.

Congratulations—you've done it! While it might not have gone perfectly, the conversation provided a valuable forum for everyone involved and hopefully provided what was needed to fulfill your desired outcomes, deliverables, and planned next steps. Thank your attendees for their time, energy, and patience, and remind them of what to expect next (Step 8)[9]: Is there another meeting planned? Will you send out the results? Will this inform a planning process? If you have an evaluation or exit survey, distribute it and instruct participants on where to return it. Finally, ensure attendees know how to reach you by displaying your contact information on a final slide or providing cards on each table.

8 Recognize the limits of this advice. If a significant portion of the audience is asking for a change to the agenda, such as wanting more time for answering questions, don't be so stubborn that you alienate the entire audience or cause people to leave.

9 Don't forget to identify what the planned next steps will be at the beginning of your meeting.

## Step 8: Reflect and Report

### After your conversation

*Many outputs, outcomes, and next steps may emerge from your community conversation. Since you discussed potential results early on with your local advisory group, now is the time to reflect and follow through. If your goal was to provide information to decision-makers, consider what they need moving forward. Were you aiming to inform a planning process or contribute to a master plan? Now is the moment to compile the specific information to be shared—perhaps preparing a presentation of your results for local officials is in order.*

- [ ] **Hold a final meeting with your advisory group.**

After your conversation(s) has concluded, consider meeting one last time with your advisory group to debrief and reflect. If you used an exit survey to collect information from participants, this would be a great time to review those results. Additionally, you might want to address any unanswered questions from the event and revisit the planned next steps—such as preparing a community report—including how and when those steps will be carried out.

- [ ] **Prepare and disseminate a community report.**

All five of our pilot programs prepared community reports that were shared with participants and other local stakeholders. Hopefully this useful resource is one you've planned in your desired outcomes and deliverables (Step 2). Distributing a report helps participants feel their concerns and priorities were acknowledged, and it provides a way to address specific questions that couldn't be answered during the conversation. Community reports can also include resources useful to participants and residents, such as information for landowners interested in leasing land to developers. Check out the Resource Library for examples of community reports from our pilot conversations. Hopefully this useful resource is one you've planned in your desired outcomes and deliverables (Step 2).

- [ ] **Create an online "home" for resources.**

In addition to, or instead of, a community report, consider developing an online space to share results and related resources from your conversation(s). You might use an existing website or create a new one. In either case, ensure your online hub allows for easy updates and additional information for interested or concerned residents.


*Screenshot of website for pilot conversation in Michigan.*

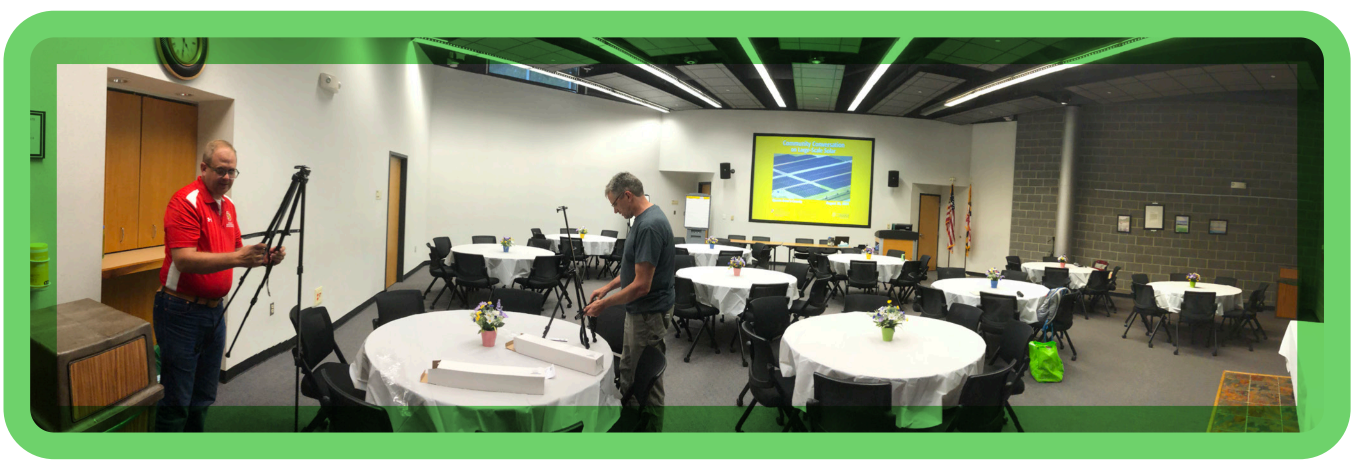
A great example is this website, created using Google Sites by our pilot partner in Michigan. The site includes tools and recommendations that community members and local stakeholders can use to inform or influence LSS development, such as:

- Planning and zoning guides
- Examples of developer agreements
- Sample resolutions
- Good neighbor agreement examples
- Community benefits agreement examples
- Decommissioning plan examples
- Solar leasing guides for farmers
- Fire and safety training manuals
- Fact sheets on solar panels and projects (e.g., toxicity, taxes)

Consider also providing documentation about the conversation itself, which could include:

- Meeting notes
- Maps
- Survey results
- Video recordings of presentations and/or slide decks
- Frequently asked questions with responses or contacts for follow-up
- Contact information for meeting conveners, advisory group members, and guest speakers

We hope the information and recommendations in this guidebook help you host a successful community conversation. For additional resources and sample documents, visit our online Resource Library. It features sample agendas, marketing materials, slide decks, roundtable discussion prompts, and a list of frequently asked questions, among other tools. Each resource is numbered to correspond with the steps in this guidebook. For example, if you're conducting a community survey as outlined in Step 1, refer to *Resource 1.2: Community Survey: Michigan.* Looking for examples of websites created from community conversations? Check out *Resource 8.1: Online Hubs for Conversations*.



*Setting up for the Maryland conversation. Photo by Jacob White (Michigan State University).*

## For Sample Documents and More Information, Visit Our Resource Library

Visit our Resource Library for sample documents, relevant links, and other useful materials. The library is regularly updated, so check back often for newly added materials that could be helpful.

- **1.1** CCSD Project Introduction
- **1.2** Community Survey: Michigan
- **2.1** FAQs
- **4.1** Exit Survey: Iowa
- **4.2** Handouts for Roundtable Conversations: Wisconsin
- **4.3** Posters for Roundtable Conversations
- **4.4** Presentation 1—The Good-the Bad-and the Tradeoffs for LSS: Michigan
- **4.5** Presentation 2—Community Conversations on LSS in Portage County: Wisconsin
- **4.6** Presentation 3—Linn County & the Utility-Scale Solar Experience: Iowa
- **4.7** Sample Agenda: Wisconsin
- **4.8** Sample Agenda: Iowa
- **6.1** Digital & Print Flyer 1: Michigan
- **6.2** Digital & Print Flyer 2: Michigan
- **6.3** Digital & Print Flyer 3: Iowa
- **6.4** Social Media Flyer 1: Michigan
- **6.5** Social Media Flyer 2: Michigan
- **6.6** Social Media Flyer 3: Michigan
- **8.1** Online Hubs for Conversations
- **8.2** Community Report: Michigan Pilot
- **8.3** Community Report: Wisconsin Pilot
- **8.4** Community Report: New York
- **8.5** Community Report: Maryland

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