

Public Participation, Community Engagement, and Utility Regulation: Lessons and Paths Forward from Hawaii

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What should the role of PUCs be regarding public engagement?



Challenges for PUCs/Context

General

- Renewable Portfolio Standards (RPS), environmental concerns
- Increasingly dynamic and decentralized grid
- Public and legislative calls for greater public input, calls for a “Just Transition”

Hawaii

- 100% RPS by 2045
 - Kauai at 60.2%
 - 32% elsewhere
- 6 island grids
- Severely land-constrained
- High price of electricity (41.11¢/kWh vs. 12.49¢/kWh national average)

Public Engagement

Public Participation

- Interactions between the public and a PUC
- may range from formal participation in a docketed proceeding to informal participation in workshops, public comments, etc.

Community Engagement

- interactions between the public and a utility or developer, which in turn may be regulated by a PUC
- For example, community engagement by a developer for a new renewable energy project or by a utility for a program

Methods

- 30+ Interviews
 - PUCs nationwide + FERC
 - Hawaii government officials (including current and former PUC Commissioners)
 - Intervenors, advocates, community-based organizations
 - Utilities and developers
 - Subject matter experts
- Review of emerging and best practices
- Case studies



Challenges

1. Who is the public? Who is community?
2. Educating participants
3. Overburdened Commissions and shifting needs



The Role of Commissions

- Who should be doing public engagement relating to renewable energy?
 - State agencies, utilities, developers?
- Potential roles
 - Educate
 - Facilitate
 - Represent
- Unclear legal mandate



A Typology of Public Engagement

- Outreach
- Solicitation
- Regulation
- Alternative Models



Outreach

- Efforts by the commission to share what it does with the public, including online presence and social media, media engagement, and education.
- Examples
 - New offices (Public Utilities Commission of Texas—PUCT, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission—FERC, California Public Utilities Commission)
 - Greater website accessibility (Minnesota, Vermont, Hawaii)
 - Trainings and creating “how to” guides (Oregon, Minnesota, Vermont)



Solicitation

- Actions by the PUC that encourage stakeholders, and in particular community stakeholders, to engage with the PUC.
- Examples
 - Compensation (Stakeholder or Intervenor)
 - Oversight Boards (California)



Regulation

- requiring utilities to lead community engagement and to then regulate that engagement
- Hawaii's newest Request for Proposals
 - \$3,000/MW/Year
- Illinois' Multi-Year Integrated Grid Planning
 - Workshop process for grid planning
 - Facilitated by independent third party
 - “solicit and consider input from diverse stakeholders, including representatives from environmental justice communities, geographically diverse communities, low-income representatives, consumer representatives, environmental representatives, organized labor representatives, third-party technology providers, and utilities”



Alternative Models

- Hawaii Electric Reliability Administrator
- Reverse auctions
- Community-led planning processes (Molokai, Hawaii)



Preliminary Conclusions

- Huge need for outreach and education
- PUCs must work closely with others (local government, other state agencies, utilities, developers, environmental and energy justice groups, community-based organizations, affordability advocates, and MORE)
- Participation can be broader than just formal intervention in dockets

The promise of public engagement is a quicker, more just and affordable energy transition. The pitfall is making it too easy for progress to be stopped.



Mahalo!

