

Katie Kienbaum:

My name is Katie Kienbaum. I use she/her pronouns and I am a senior researcher with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance at our Energy Democracy Initiative. At the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, I focused on various issues related to clean energy and local distributed energy resources, including local ownership, rooftop and community solar, and barriers from interconnection and permitting issues. But I also around that do a lot of policy research and advocacy both at the federal and state levels, especially here in Minnesota where I'm based, but also at the local level, which is where we're going to really be focusing our conversation today. And for this webinar, I'm going to be doing a brief presentation at the start just to kind of set the stage and I will also be moderating our panelist discussion, which is where we'll spend most of our time today.

And just before we move on, I'll also say thank you very much to my colleague, Kate Taylor Mighty, because she has been instrumental in getting this webinar set up and is also running the slides for us today. So thank you so much, Kate, and then you can go to the next one.

So we'll start out, like I said, with a brief introduction to the topic. We'll also introduce our recent local energy policy toolkit and do a quick demonstration of that just to get the conversation started today. And then that's going to set us up for the panelist discussion where we will spend most of our time and we'll really dig into what local governments and communities are actually doing around the country. I'm really excited to introduce you to our wonderful panelists and hear more from them. So stay tuned for that. We will have opportunity in that for audience questions, but just please try to submit those using the Q&A feature as you think of them and as they come up the earlier you submit your question, the more of a chance there will be that we'll answer it. So please try to get those in as soon as you can.

And next slide please. Like I said, we will begin with that background presentation before getting into the discussion in Q&A.

So I'm sure it's news to no one to say that under the Trump administration, the federal government has really pivoted from supporting clean energy and other climate and resiliency solutions to just being outright hostile in many cases, from slashing tax credits for renewables, withholding funds for low income solar, blocking offshore wind, pulling back on climate regulations. There's just been a lot of efforts to cut that support and those federal incentives for local clean energy projects while also erecting new barriers that projects have to overcome. And I think this is especially true of projects that are focused on supporting communities who have been historically marginalized and addressing historic and present day inequities in our society, whether that's differences in access to solar energy or in vulnerability to climate disasters.

And then even with that, we know that communities are not backing down. We see that even with the headwinds that folks are working against, local governments, community organizers are just continuing to advance their clean energy and climate work locally. In my experience, I've seen that cities and towns can be really creative and resourceful when it comes to solving issues that they're facing in their community. I see that they're using those skills now to find ways around the federal roadblocks and around the funding gaps that we see in order to continue their important work. Cities continue to have many of the same opportunities they've always had when it comes to addressing climate change and access to clean energy and other energy affordability issues. And now with the inaction at the federal

level, they have a really important role to play in addressing climate risks and bringing the benefits of clean energy to more people and communities.

We're actually going to talk a little bit about the benefits of local clean energy since I've mentioned that a few times already, why does this matter? It matters because having access to clean energy in our communities, especially locally owned clean energy, it brings local jobs. It helps folks save money on their energy bills. It builds wealth locally. It keeps economic investment in the community instead of being sent to a large energy corporation that might not even be located in your own state. It also keeps decisions local too, which is really important. Being able to put decision-making power and choices in people's hands instead of incorporations. Move forward, Kate.

And so that's one of the things that we've highlighted in our local energy policy toolkit. So we have a bunch of the opportunities available to communities today in order to take action on energy in this toolkit. You'll see it has two parts. It's divided into opportunities to build community power, like this local clean energy I was talking about, but also opportunities to fight corporate control. Our goal with the toolkit was really to provide proven strategies for local energy action, informative examples from across the country and actionable tools to help you all take the next step. We tried to not only share research and background info, but also identify concrete resources and tools that you can actually use to help explore and advance these policy issues locally. We also tried to keep it from getting too overwhelming. So it is just a snapshot of what cities can do.

It's not everything local cities and communities can do on climate or energy, but it is a great jumping off point for anyone who's looking for a place to start and it includes a lot of helpful resources on these specific policy issues. And so we have, like I said, these two sections that they're divided into. Each section has various strategies. For each strategy, we have information on the background to help orient you to the issue, examples of how local communities are taking action, and then also a list of helpful tools and resources.

So we're actually going to do a demonstration of it just to kind of introduce it to y'all a little bit more clearly because I can talk about it, but seeing it is probably more helpful. Kate, if you don't mind stopping sharing the slides, I will start the demonstration on my end. Okay. So this is the local energy policy toolkit homepage. So this'll be what you see when you pop it up. We have the two parts and on this page you can click to either part that you want to see. You can also click to the individual section. So if you already know that you're really interested in learning how you can leverage a municipal utility in your community, you can just click right to that section. We also have PDFs available to download for each section in case that's easier for you to view or share or search.

I'm going to show you what part two looks like and I actually already have that loaded, so I'm going to click to that tab. So this is part two and we just divide it into two parts really to make it more user-friendly so it's more bite-sized. So this is Part Two of the Local Energy Policy Toolkit. This is the part that's focused on fighting corporate control. To navigate the toolkit, you can either scroll down or you can also use this navigation bar that you'll see at the top of the page. It should get pinned as you scroll. So you can click through there too, whatever is convenient for you for navigating. Those are all the options you have. And you can see here's one example of a section. We have some background information here. Some sections will also have helpful maps or videos or graphics that you can use to just help guide your understanding of the issue, of course.

We also have for each section various examples of communities from across the country and what they're doing on this topic. So here you can see we have some different cities and we'll have a little description of what they're doing. So this section is on negotiating with utilities. So we have information on what Moab is doing in Utah about that. And in some of these, we also have little excerpts of podcast interviews as well. So there's some multimedia in here. At the end of each section, we have a list of resources and links out to helpful tools, information to kind of help you get started. Like I said, we try to focus on things that are actually going to really help you take action. So for instance, in this section, you can see that we've included examples of franchise agreements and fees from other cities. So you can take a look at those while perhaps you're crafting your own.

We also, in other sections, we have links to model RFPs. We have guides that other organizations have put together. We have different tools and resources that you can really use to make that next step.

And I'll say throughout the Toolkit, we also have, again, links to that other part of the Toolkit and to the PDF to download. We also have our email here, our contact email, because we want you to email us. Please give us feedback on the Toolkit, ask us questions, make suggestions on really helpful resources that you've found or let us know about a city that's doing something really cool on one of these issues and maybe we'll include it in an update of the Toolkit. So I'm going to stop sharing here now so we can go back to the slides with Kate.

All right. So we are going to move into the panelist discussion now and I just want to remind people to try to put audience questions into the Q&A box so we have that once we get to the audience questions section. But first, let me introduce our panelists. Great. Thank you, Kate. All right. So I am so excited, as I said earlier, to introduce you to these wonderful panelists today. I am going to share some quick versions of their bios, but you can read their fullest accomplishments and bios on our landing page for the webinar. And I'll also ask for the panelists to come on camera again now if you're ready so we can see your wonderful faces. So first off, I am going to introduce Josh Cox. Josh is the CEO of Community Power South, a nonprofit solar developer that leverages federal and state incentives to help churches, schools, and community institutions establish resilience hubs.

Before that, he led Resilience Works, a national labor brokerage building the workforce needed to address climate change. He served as Director of Policy and Intergovernmental Affairs at the Orleans Parish School Board and he was the senior advisor and director of strategic initiatives to former Mayor LaToya Cantrell. Next up we have Katie Cashman. Katie is a Minneapolis-based climate and public affairs professional who has focused her career on advancing sustainable urban infrastructure. Excuse me. Most recently, she was a Minneapolis City Council member where she led franchise agreement negotiations with local electric and gas utilities and chair of the city's Climate and Infrastructure Committee and served on the Clean Energy Partnership. She previously worked for the United States Urban Settlements Program and the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. And then thirdly and lastly, we have Council Member Sean Elo-Rivera, who proudly represents San Diego's Ninth City Council District and is committed to his vision of Opportunity for All.

Prior to joining the council, Sean served on the San Diego Community College District Board of Trustees and led community organizing policy and civic engagement efforts at a local nonprofit. Sean came to San Diego originally to attend California Western School of Law, where he earned honors for his pro bono

service while earning his Juris Doctor. Welcome all. So glad to have all of you here today. We are going to turn off the slides for now just so we can see everyone's faces a little bit easier for our discussion. All right, I see everyone there. Wonderful. So we're going to start with some prepared questions and then we'll go to audience questions and I'm going to kick off by asking everyone per the title of the webinar, how has your community advanced climate and clean energy efforts locally despite setbacks at the federal level? Katie, I'm going to kick it to you first.

Katie Cashman:

Sounds good. Thank you. Well, it's nice to be here with everyone. So I'm based in Minneapolis and our advocacy community, our neighborhoods have been pushing very hard for weatherization and retrofitting our housing stock. Because we're in such a cold weather climate, every leak in the window is money wasted and it's also emissions wasted. And so we've really focused on our building stock in transportation, of course, but I want to talk mostly about buildings. We're funding weatherization and retrofitting programs at the local level and the way that we do this is by leveraging franchise fees and pollution control annual registry funds from the top polluters in our city. So really following the Polluter Pays Principle to make sure that we have the funding to help homes, homeowners and rental properties in our lowest income neighborhoods to update their buildings.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thank you, Katie. I'm excited to dig into that a little bit more when we get to further questions. I'm going to jump to Sean next. Same question, how you're advancing climate and clean energy efforts locally.

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Yeah, thanks, Katie. Glad to be here. So one, I'm going to start with a philosophy and there's this question that I've been trying to pose about what we would do if we approach clean energy the way fossil fuel executives approach their work and obviously not from their ethics. That's not what we're trying to say here, but the urgency and the idea that they can shape the future and refuse to accept the status quo. Now, they do that in pursuit of profit regardless of the impacts and we can do that for the opposite purpose to make sure that we have the cleanest, most affordable energy possible. But that idea of we're going to shape the future, I think that that's something that all of us both in government and outside of government who are fighting for a clean energy future can do much more so than we do right now.

We tend to make ourselves more subjective to the conditions that currently exist than I think we need to do. So I also just want to acknowledge that I think there's a lot of room for growth in San Diego, but one thing that we did do that I think is really useful and is a good tool, finalized an energy savings performance contract that's going to retrofit 40 city facilities, 23 buildings will be electrified, 39,000 streetlights will be improved and there'll be about four megawatts of energy storage and we're not going to have to wait for a federal grant or a budget surplus in order to do that. That's something that we were able to get done and get done quickly. There's also some very good work happening at San Diego Community Power generating electricity at costs that come in lower than our investor-owned utility. And that's obviously a win for the climate and a win for residents.

Utility bills are incredibly expensive in San Diego and California and this is a way for us to save money and every dollar accounts there. So again, I think there's room for improvement, but we're really trying to lean in with this idea that we're not going to just accept the conditions that are being imposed on us,

but we're going to shape the future and be as creative as possible and act with as much urgency as possible in doing that.

Katie Kienbaum:

I love that answer, Sean. I think it's really important to make sure that cities can do so much and not cutting ourselves short preemptively unnecessarily. Josh, same question for you. Would love to hear how you're working to advance climate and clean energy efforts despite federal setbacks in Louisiana.

Josh Cox:

Thanks much. I think my answer splits into two distinct buckets. One is policy and the other is actual just construction and development. From a policy standpoint, what's happening here in New Orleans is very similar to what Sean just described. Obviously we're in a deep red state where renewable energy is not in vogue, but New Orleans, the city actually has the ability to regulate its own private investor utility. And so unlike counterparts in other states where you've got to contend with a public service commission or some sort of energy commission that is statewide and dilutes your power in New Orleans, we actually have to literally just get to seven. That's how many people or four. I mean, that's how many people are on the city council. And so that's actually created some really cool opportunities. For instance, the city just passed a \$30 million subsidy for batteries that is going to hopefully lead into what we're calling the Neighborhood Power Plan.

And let's be clear, Community Power South does this or we are the developer for some of these projects, but it is the organizing work of Together New Orleans that makes this sort of political and policy strategy possible. But it is a \$30 million subsidy so that residents could actually get batteries on their property, which A, will hopefully prevent the utility from building another peaker plant and instead could use that extra energy generated from buildings when it's needed. And then secondly, obviously we're in the eyes of hurricanes. And so if you're able to put these batteries that are subsidized by city money on properties that already have solar arrays, you have evergreen energy and little resilience hubs in community because we know we're going to need it multiple times a year. On the development side, which is far more of what I do directly, the federal government used to be the source for doing renewable energy projects, so we've had to get really creative about how to get them funded.

And we've started to look at the state legislature and then also in creative ways to have municipalities funded. So cities are cash strapped, as I know Katie and Sean know, and so we knew we couldn't go to the general fund budget, so we ended up going through the bond package, which the city passed last year. It's kind of unencumbered money. It's like some of the few money that's free that you can get creative with. And so similarly at the state level, we were able to get ourselves provided we don't get vetoed for an additional four projects throughout the state of Louisiana. So the strategies are different depending on what you're hoping to accomplish, whether it's a policy win or just getting solar and battery on buildings, but we've certainly had to be creative in figuring out next steps given the current climate.

Katie Kienbaum:

And that's actually a great segue into my next question, Josh. I was going to ask everyone to speak a little bit more about how exactly you are adapting to the current situation at the federal government and how maybe your efforts have changed because of that, or if you've adopted new strategies, approaches, if there are any new opportunities that you're taking advantage of. So I'll actually pass that right back to you, Josh, in case you wanted to say more about what you were just talking about.

Josh Cox:

I mean, strategy number one is get as much money as we can to do as many projects as we can before the tax credits run out. The capital stack for a project is very heavily subsidized by the federal government. In our case, it's basically around 50% of every project is subsidized by the tax credits. And so because that runs out at the end of 2027, we're in a mad sprint to get as many of these things built as we can. But second, I think we are starting to look at and figure out, okay, what renewable energy projects will continue to be tax rebatable because the One Big Beautiful Bill did not kill everything. For instance, batteries can still access the tax credit subsidy. And so now we're trying to get creative about thinking about how we can use batteries in a mobile way. I mean, if you put a battery on a trailer, you actually have a mobile flexible resilience asset.

So we're trying to think about creative ways that still allow us to maintain the same capital stack but can help us save ourselves during the next storm.

Katie Kienbaum:

That's great. Thank you so much, Josh, for expanding on that. Sean, curious how you are thinking about it in San Diego, how you're adapting to the changes and if you've identified any new approaches or strategies that you're taking.

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Yeah, I don't know if it's a change so much as a doubling down on certain components of it and with more urgency. I think that the federal governments, it's very clear where they stand and it's very unhelpful in many ways, but there is some certainty there. We know where the money's not coming from in the next few years. And it also, I think it's kind of a wake-up call that we have to be more committed to, again, shaping our own future and not hoping because I love hope. I appreciate it. I encourage people to have it. It's also not a strategy. And so what we've really tried to lean into is demanding that the city and all of the different agencies where I sit on as a board member really think about what opportunities there are for partnership at the local level so that we can, again, shape the future here.

And I'll give a couple examples. One is demanding that our public utilities department work with San Diego Community Power to identify opportunities for the development of clean energy production on public utility department property that has a dual benefit of increasing capacity and the revenue generated there. California, for all that's said about us being a high tax state, we're also very, very tightly regulated and boxed in on how we can tax and even the fees that we can collect. And so water rates, as an example, cannot be different no matter how much water's used a mansion in one part of the city can run their hose all day long and poor folks who are counting every drop, they have the same water rates and we cannot use rates to subsidize low income people. So revenue that's produced from a power purchase agreement, for example, on public utilities department property, that revenue actually can be used to subsidize water rates and there you get a win-win.

And so when we have abstract conversations about the benefits of clean energy for people who are literally just trying to survive the day or to the end of the week, I think we lose folks. But when we say by leaning in here, we can save you money in multiple directions that creates more political momentum for these causes. So there's that public utilities department demand for partnership with community power. And then another place where we've done something similar is with the transit agency and we've said, "Transit agency owns a significant amount of property and we need you to reach out to San Diego

community power. Community power, we need you to sit down with the transit agency and don't just accept what is proposed as potential partnership. Sit there, again, as if you were an oil executive and you were thinking of that transit agency property as potential oil wells, what would you see as possible there?" And so everywhere we sit, we're trying to force those conversations and make sure that the city and our local partner agencies are trying to do everything that they can to increase production and bring down cost.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thanks so much, Sean. I really appreciated the framing you had at the beginning there that you're not necessarily changing anything, but you are doubling down. And I also think that everything you talked about, great examples of how cities are just very good at doing a lot with not always a lot of resources or a lot of freedom from the state or the federal level. So thank you. Thank you so much for sharing that. Katie, how have you seen Minneapolis adapt to changes at the federal level?

Katie Cashman:

Yeah, I'm loving hearing about Louisiana and California as well, because what I'm hearing from Josh and Sean is that you leave no stone unturned. Every single agency, whether they have a bunch of land or they have this funding mechanism or they have this regulatory authority needs to get in the game. And I think in Minneapolis we're doing that too where we're not counting out any opportunity to invest in our clean energy infrastructure. What we've done in the last couple of years is really ramped up our funding for clean energy investments. I wish we had bonding tools and things like that, but what we do have is our franchise fees and we have our pollution control annual registry. We dedicated \$10 million a year to a dedicated climate action funding stream with those sources of revenue. Then last year when we realized no one's coming to save us, the feds aren't coming to save us, we need to ramp this up again ourselves, we increased those fees on our top polluters and that was not easy.

Lots of pushback from the biggest businesses in town, lots of pushback from landowners, landlords, and we had a lot of negotiations with the mayor about the fees that we were going to set, what the rates would be at. He vetoed many of these actions. We had to override vetoes. There was a lot of governance conversation that went into this, but ultimately, I agree that franchise fees aren't the perfect tool to fund climate action, but it is what we have. And so what we did was we ramped up electric and gas costs for the top users in the city. We also added a carbon dioxide equivalence class to our pollution control annual registry. So we are charging those polluters in the city for their carbon dioxide equivalents in addition to the other things we were already charging for like VOCs and nitrous oxide and other pollutants.

And then I do want to spend a minute on our franchise agreements because that's more of a stick than a carrot in policy terms and the franchise agreements are how we as a city can negotiate with utilities. We do have a public utilities commission. So we don't have the local authority to really regulate how they're rolling out their products, but we do have our franchise agreements. And in Minneapolis they are doing work all over the city in the public right of way. So I wanted to share a link which I'll send over to Kate to post, but we actually detailed everything that we asked for in our negotiations and what we got out of the negotiations because we want other cities to be able to look at this example and see that you can absolutely shoot for the moon in what you're asking for and don't sell yourself short in negotiating away your own power at the beginning of these negotiations.

So we got our utilities to agree to local climate targets, which was the first in the nation to have them setting CenterPoint and Excel setting local climate targets, service level delivery expectations, better ADA compliance, better restoration of the ecosystem after they've dug up and installed infrastructure, more information sharing between us and the utilities. So I'm going to share this link and I hope that some people will be able to check out this document if this is of interest.

Katie Kienbaum:

And we will also make sure to share that with everyone afterwards too. So don't stress out if you forget to copy it over right now, but thank you so much and that's the heat franchise agreement stuff in Minneapolis is huge. And that was actually, I'm going to interrupt with an audience question because I think this is a good time to slot it in since we are talking about franchise agreements, but we did have an audience question asking of examples of winning strategies that leveraged negotiations of existing or renewed franchise agreements with monopoly electric utilities and if there were material wins from municipalities and city residents. So I know Katie, you were just talking about that if there's anything you want to add to that, but I also know that San Diego has taken advantage of the franchise agreement negotiation. So I was also going to give Sean an opportunity to talk about that as well.

But Katie, is there anything you want to add in response to that question or do you feel like they should check out the PDF

Katie Cashman:

You share? Yeah, I mentioned a lot of the things we won, but also we got flexible timing in there and an opt-out language so that they weren't just on coast and the utilities also have to report every single year on their achievements toward these goals. We make that very public and transparency is so important in this work, could not be more important in this work because as Sean said, you have to have everyone in the community empowered to be able to really push for the future that we want. And so the community and their activation in Minneapolis is our strongest tool and bad PR for the utilities is their biggest fear. So that works hand in hand where we really leverage that. We work a lot with media, we hold press conferences, we come to their offices. We are very loud in our pressure on the utilities to move towards clean energy.

And that's the strongest thing I think that we can do to get the ball rolling on really positive changes.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thank you, Katie. And Sean, I wanted to see if you would be willing to speak a little bit about some of the concessions that you won in your franchise agreement negotiations.

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Yeah, there's a lot similar to what Katie mentioned actually. And I'll preface this and I think Katie did something similar and my guess is you two are hearing your climate advocate friends in the back of your head making sure that we acknowledge that this is an ideal, my ideal world doesn't involve partnership with a for-profit monopoly, all of those caveats aside. And we were dealing with a situation where when I entered office, the franchises had basically expired and it needed to get done very quickly. And we quite simply as a city, San Diego is a city that now leans in a more progressive direction but has long had very conservative leadership that has left this city resource starved for a long time. And that means that there are basic functions of government that the city has not demonstrated an ability to do well, nor is it positioned to do as well as I'd like.

So I can have a democratic socialist vision for San Diego and also acknowledge that we've got a lot of building to do and infrastructure to build before our foundation is solid enough to do more ambitious things like run a municipal utility. And so we needed to bridge that gap and in the negotiations at the very end, there were a couple concessions that I think were important that we got. There is the energy cooperation agreement that requires alignment with our climate action goals. That's important. There's regular reporting to city council, which very similar to what Katie said, that's an opportunity for us to publicly hold the utilities feet to the fire to demand questions about shifting the clean energy about a cost. The cost component is always a topic of conversation there. We get to ask about their executive pay in a public setting, which is very uncomfortable.

We get to say, "How can you say you're prioritizing affordability when your executives are making what you're making?" And then they obviously say, "Well, we don't use ratepayer [funds]." And it's like, we don't want to hear it. They're making millions, our folks are paying too much, and that's important. There's the opt-out as well that we have. And so now we've got the opt-out. We had them fund a municipalization study so that we actually know what needs to be done in order to have that as a real option. And then the last thing that was, I think, pretty important, there's a solar equity program, which is funding, putting solar into the community. And then we also had, there was this provision that they'd built into the proposed contract that was going to provide funding for what we call a climate equity fund, and it was going to be at the back end of the 20-year agreement.

So if we extended for an additional 10 years, at the very end, we could get \$10 million over the course of five years. And I said, "Absolutely not. If you want my vote, we're going to have to accelerate that to the first five years. We're going to get that at the beginning, not at the end." So we tried to squeeze what we can out again, acknowledging the partnership generally is not ideal. For-profit monopolies are never going to be acting in the best interest of the community, whether that means from a climate action perspective or an affordability perspective. And we do think we made it better than it was significantly better than it was and definitely better than it could have been.

Katie Kienbaum:

Yeah, I appreciate that, Sean. Thank you so much. And I'm sure we'll have more opportunities to dive into franchise agreements more. It's always a huge interest I think people have, especially at the city, local government level. And we've already mentioned it at this point a couple times, but affordability, of course, is the word of the moment, word of the year. I'm curious of y'all how your communities are working to incorporate affordability concerns into your work on climate and clean energy, especially for low-income households and historically marginalized communities, including communities of color. And so I think it's been a minute since we heard from you, Josh. So I'm going to jump to you first and let you speak a little bit more about how you're thinking about that down in New Orleans.

Josh Cox:

Yeah. So I think going back to the whole issue of local control, it's allowed us to do things that never would've been possible in other parts of Louisiana. And so right now we are actually constructing the first community solar development in the state of Louisiana. It's a five megawatt parcel that's in New Orleans East, about 20 acres and it's going to reduce energy bills for about 700 families in New Orleans. And so this is a project that's been led by Together New Orleans, but Community Power South has certainly been a part of it. I think that is one of the direct ways that you can see the linkage between political power and votes like Sean just mentioned and actual outcomes for families over a long term. For

instance, the community solar development that we're working on right now didn't pencil about five years ago because the utility had captured the council at the time and set the payback rates for that energy such that the development didn't make any sense.

And so it took organizing and a lot of just out in the open political fights to change the payment rate for that energy to actually make a community solar development viable. So I'm really looking forward. We hope to put it into service before the end of 2026 and it'll immediately start helping folks who are extremely cash-trapped and for whom the energy burden just keeps getting greater and greater here.

Katie Kienbaum:

That's massive. And I think if I'm understanding correctly, the thing that made it possible was that the city government is able to ... The city actually has more regulatory power over your local utilities, so you're able to push that through even though Louisiana, unlike Minnesota, Louisiana doesn't have a statewide community solar program that requires utilities to offer those.

Josh Cox:

Exactly, exactly. New Orleans controls its utility and so much more is possible here that is not possible elsewhere in the state.

Katie Kienbaum:

And I will say though, even if you don't have a state law and you aren't New Orleans and you don't regulate your utility, if you do have a municipal utility, that can be an option to advance community solar locally. I mean the energy system, it varies so much from community to community, but there are a lot of opportunities to be creative about what you have locally. Thanks, Josh. I didn't cut you off, right? That was- No,

Josh Cox:

No, no, that's it.

Katie Kienbaum:

Perfect. I was too excited to talk about community solar. I didn't want to cut you off though. Sean, can you perhaps speak a little bit more too about how you're ... It seems like something that's very top of mind for y'all in San Diego when you're thinking about climate and clean energy work, how it's fitting in with all the other things you care about, including affordability, if you could speak more about how you're approaching that.

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Yes, definitely. So first, again, framing how we think about that and it's not as a buzzword, but as a thing that actually means something to people. There was this thing that happened after the 2024 election where just, I'll name it, I think Democratic politicians knew affordability was a problem and then started talking about it in this abstract sense almost as anthropologists discussing far afield society and it's like, no, this is people in our communities who are struggling to pay their bills and how do you make life easier for them? You save them money. What are we actually talking about? So this is a multi-pronged approach and again, working within the various boxes that we have to work within. I mentioned one of them, which is this twofold approach of trying to save folks money on their water bills, people who really need to save money on their water bills by having more clean energy production on our public utility property that could then bring cheaper renewable energy into the community as well.

So in that instance, we're trying to do two very tangible things, lower water rates and lower utility bills, we want to communicate that in the clearest sense possible. There's also the work that we're trying to do from an advocacy perspective as a city at the state level. So the California Public Utilities Commission is who approves the rate increases from the investor-owned utilities? And we just actually at our last environment committee meeting approved a resolution to really give the city more explicit authority to advocate for specific bills that are aimed at bringing costs down and holding utilities more accountable and then providing more flexibility in terms of how money can be saved. So it's a multi-pronged approach. And again, to me, it really has to be done in this way that makes it as explicit as possible that we are talking about saving people money in their day-to-day lives, not just affordability as this broad abstract concept.

Katie Kienbaum:

Yeah, that's super helpful. So you might not live ... Sorry, I'm gathering my thoughts here. So New Orleans, of course, has the unique regulatory structure where they do have regulatory power over their local utility, but most communities do not. Most communities are like San Diego or Minneapolis where you do have a public utilities commission, like I think you both mentioned, but that's one huge strategy. I think for most communities, you can engage at the state level. That's something we included in the toolkit. It's a really effective way to actually change the things that you can't control locally. So thank you for bringing that up, Sean. Katie, if you want to speak about how Minneapolis is addressing affordability and cost concerns alongside climate and clean energy.

Katie Cashman:

Yes. So we measure energy burden and this is a really important tool to track how much of your monthly income is going towards your utilities. And we have a goal as a city to have no one paying more than 6% of their monthly income towards utilities, but right now we have some communities paying up to 20% having a 20% energy burden. So it is a huge, huge cost. And just to give an example of this, I went into a small shop the other day at thrift store, local mom and pop thrift store and found out that she has to close her business and she started telling me why and I assumed it was because of the cost of rent. She has to pay a couple thousand dollars in rent every month to her landlord and she can't keep up. But no, the actual reason she has to close is because of her utility bills are so high that she can't keep her business afloat.

So it's becoming really challenging. And the ways that we're trying to address this is again, through investing our local climate funds into the neighborhoods with the highest energy burden to make sure that buildings in those areas are getting retrofitted and sealed up and weatherized to lower energy bills. But we have a pretty steep hill to climb here and there's something in Minnesota called the Minnesota Paradox where we appear to have really amazing rates of health, education, affordability, all these things, but the disparities between white and non-white communities is so large that that really undoes all of what you think is great. In Minneapolis, we have a 2% energy burden. And then when you look at the map, you see, and I'm going to post also if you go to page 65 on our climate equity plan, you see a map that shows that the white neighborhoods in the western edge of the city near the lakes have a 0.5% energy burden.

And then you go to the BIPOC neighborhoods in south and north and there's up to 20% energy burden. So the disparity is huge and that's really what we're trying to correct for as a city.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thank you, Katie. And like I said before, we'll make sure that these links go out to folks too. So if you want to take a look at that later as well. All right. So next I'd like to ask before just one last question before we get to some more audience questions. For any local officials, city staff, community activists who may be listening today and who want to push their local government to take more action on climate and clean energy, where would you recommend they start? What's their first step? Let's just go back through, can bump it back to you, Katie. And yeah, just where should they start? There's a lot of things.

Katie Cashman:

There's a lot of that. There's a lot of things. Minnesota is really famous for neighborism. That is what made us all throughout the headlines this winter because of our response to ICE has actually been showing up for our neighbors. And this is the exact same principle in any community organizing, meet your neighbors. Literally know the people on your block. That is the best way for you to be able to organize. You don't need to know everyone around the state, but if you know the people in your own community, you can make a huge impact. And what we did for climate equity was in 2021, we launched a citywide campaign where each ward of the 13 wards had a team. I was the lead for ward seven and just did one-on-one meetings with neighbors and people in my community who care about clean energy. Well, we ended up being a huge force.

One by one, we grew into thousands of people who started flooding city hall, arranging meetings with our council members, arranging meetings with the mayor, arranging meetings with sustainability staff and demanding that the city do more. And so fast forward five years later, the community advocacy is still the force that's driving improvements. Now we're focusing our energy on geothermal because we know that's the next big frontier for Minneapolis to really get off fossil gas and have a clean heat source. So my top advice would be meet your neighbors and talk about energy the way you talk about anything else.

Katie Kienbaum:

I mean, we've been talking about renewable power, but people power is really underlying a lot of this, of course. So thank you for reminding us of that, Katie. Josh, what would your advice be for where local community activists or city staffers who want to do more on this should start?

Josh Cox:

I think Katie nailed it. Build power. I mean, your utility has power, so you need to make sure that you build enough to be able to fight for what you want. It's really that simple. I think the actual policy solution is almost secondary to building the power to be able to demand it and ask for it and then to strategically set out the course to make it happen.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thank you, Josh. Sean, what's your answer? Is it a plus three or do you have something else you want to share?

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Total co-sign. I was an organizer and advocate before I was a council member. I think Katie said it perfectly. Josh, what Josh said about the power piece of this. So just candidly speaking, I think that oftentimes on the environmental side of advocacy and climate in particular, we can be a little wonky before we are down in doing the organizing work and absent power, those white papers just are going to sit on shelves and they're going to be read by the people who already agree with us. And I appreciate that work. It's important, but absent power, it's just not going to turn into what we want it to turn into,

which is action. And we are up against incredibly well-resourced corporations, resourced to the point of being beyond our comprehension. They have literally more money than we can understand what it would be like to have.

And the only way, absent benevolent billionaires showing up on our side and using all of their wealth to be the counterbalance, and again, hope is not a strategy... absent that, then we're going to have to build the people power and that's totally doable. What are we fighting for? We're fighting to bring people to make life more affordable, to save people money, and to make our world a cleaner, healthier place to live. And that is a real thing that you can get people organized around, but you have to have those conversations that Katie talked about. And so yeah, that is where I would start.

Katie Kienbaum:

I want everyone in the audience to know that we did not plan that for that to be the same answer from everyone. So that was just a true from the heart truth for all of you. All right. I'm going to jump. I almost wish we could end there, but I do have some more time and some audience questions. That was just a powerful ending. I will jump to those and bring us back maybe to some wonkier discussion topics. So keep it in the back of your mind while we're talking about this, that you need to be having these conversations with people too and not only talking about the wonky details, but I am going to ask you about the wonky details and ask everyone if they know one of the audience questions we have is asking whether there are any examples of local initiatives and policy to advance and incentivize electric vehicle use by households, but also businesses and government.

If anyone has any examples of that, feel free to jump on.

Katie Cashman:

I can share what I think is a great way to develop EV use is the car sharing platform that we have that both Minneapolis and St. Paul are Twin City fund. So it's called E-V-I-E, EVIE. And it's a great way to be able to use an electric vehicle without buying an electric vehicle. So you're renting it, you're using it to get around and then you can leave it wherever like you would a bike share program and just log where it went. I've had a lot of friends use it and I think it's been really useful for people who don't own cars.

Katie Kienbaum:

And I think a good way of making it accessible to folks who maybe don't own a car or aren't able to invest in electric vehicle as well. We can also after this share potentially some resources on electric vehicles too if no one else wants to jump in right now, but I will jump to another question. We have some questions that are very specific to different people, so I'm going to work through those. So Josh, one person asked if Direct Pay for nonprofits survived the One Big Beautiful Bill, OB3, however folks want to reply, name that.

Josh Cox:

It did, thankfully, but we are not going to be able to get Direct Pay rebates for solar after 2027, only for batteries.

Katie Kienbaum:

I like it. Yeah. But it is available until the tax credit ends for nonprofits for solar.

Josh Cox:

As of now, yes. You never know what's going to happen.

Katie Kienbaum:

All right, great. And for folks that are aware, direct pay, the tax credits, since they are a tax credit and nonprofits and local governments and other entities do not pay taxes, they were not previously able to access that tax credit. So the Inflation Reduction Act a few years ago actually changed that so you could get a direct payment in lieu of the tax credit. So that's what that person was referring to. And it was just a really important way to make sure it wasn't only businesses that could access tax credits for solar, but also municipal utilities and tribal governments and schools and nonprofit organizations too. Okay. I have a question for Sean. Someone was asking if you could speak about the effort to municipally San Diego's electric utility or the status of that. I know you mentioned that a municipalization study was one of the things that was agreed to in the franchise agreement.

If you could speak more, that would be great.

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Yeah, I mean, it's an ongoing community effort and I think it's one where there has been tension and I totally understand the frustration. Community gathered signatures to try to put it on the ballot a couple years ago at that point in time, I did not think, and several of my colleagues agreed that there had been sufficient work done with the workers who could be potentially displaced if it's not done right. And so the just transition is an important part of where we're trying to go here and that the job quality is super important. And so we're not trying to create more clean, affordable energy by making jobs worse and paying lower wages. And so that work I think is happening in a much more earnest and real way now in terms of the conversations and the recognition that that needs to be explicit, not just assumed as a conversation about municipalization.

The next phase of the study is done. We've had an initial conversation about that, a discussion of that at environment committee and that discussion will likely happen in front of the full study council as well. And what the study showed is that it is feasible. There's enormous costs associated with it as well, but that cost can, according to the study, it can be absorbed. We also know that the headwinds against that will be enormous. I will go back to something that I said earlier, which is I can have this vision of San Diego that is much, much more socially democratic than it is now, that leans much heavier into the public producing and providing the essentials for everyday people. And that ranges from energy to housing, you name it. And we have to be able to do the little things right. And so I'm constantly telling my friends and they really are my friends on the left, that we need their help in executing the little things at the city level so that folks who are not already aligned with us actually believe that something like municipalization can be done well.

The last thing I'll say on that front is I think that the effectiveness of San Diego community power as a community choice aggregation entity is one of the ways that we help build trust in not-for-profit endeavors like this. And so that being done well, which I think it is right now, that showing the opportunity to reduce cost, which is happening now, plus the city just quite frankly demonstrating more competence, which is something that we have real room for growth on is I think an essential part of the equation as well as that organizing work that Katie and Josh spoke so well too.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thank you, Sean. And I'll say Sean mentioned municipalization, community choice aggregation. If folks are curious to learn more about that, we have those information about that in our toolkit too. So there's a little background primer and examples of how communities have used that or attempted to use it. Katie, we have a question. I'm not sure if you're familiar with this in Ann Arbor, but Ann Arbor has developed what they're calling a sustainable energy utility where they're almost creating a parallel utility to the existing utility, which is DTE, to develop sustainable energy clean energy projects and connect that to residents. So we had a question if that would be feasible in Minnesota or Minneapolis specifically if you are familiar with that. If not, we can just pass on to the next question.

Katie Cashman:

Oh, I think that's an amazing example I'd love to learn more about. In Minneapolis right now, we're kind of in the early stages of scoping out networked geothermal opportunities on public properties. So we have several parcels that we're considering as a city, and this is funded by our State Department of Commerce that has amazing grant opportunities coming out for solar arrays and thermal energy networks, that sort of thing for cities and counties in the state. So in Minneapolis, we're doing a study right now of which of our public buildings could develop a networked geothermal hub. And one of the things that's being studied is whether the city could run the utility ourselves. So I think any advice that we can get from places that are doing this, we would love to hear it and connect about that so that we can really get off the CenterPoint train that we don't want to be on.

We don't want their product, we don't want their fossil gas, but we don't have the alternatives yet. So we're trying to build those alternatives.

Katie Kienbaum:

And not to sound like a broken record y'all, but we also have a little video about Networked Geothermal in the Toolkit if you want to learn more about that. So lots of great resources there that are really relevant to a lot of the things that people are talking about. If you heard something that sounded new to you or you want to learn more about it, I think we have time for a couple more questions. So I'll quickly say one of our questions we have is how does the franchise agreement strategy vary in relevance and applicability from state to state and municipality to municipality?

I'll take this one. We do, again, in the Toolkit, have some information on this, but it does depend on your state whether cities are empowered to negotiate with their utilities around the franchise agreement or the franchise fees. So there are some state limitations placed on communities in certain states, so that varies. And then I think municipality, municipality, not all municipalities have franchise agreements with investor-owned utilities. Sometimes they have a municipal utility or electric cooperative that serves them. So that's kind of all going to just really depend on what the precise situation is. But big thing is that there are differences in state permissions for communities. And then another question about franchise agreements, on person asked, what are ways to hold utilities accountable if they fail to meet the agreements that they have made with the community? For example, a payout to the people that the agreement was intended to help.

I'm curious if, I know Katie and Sean, you spoke about oversight and having visibility into that through the local government and the city council. If either of you want to speak more, if Josh, you want to jump in here about ways to hold them accountable to the agreements

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Just really quickly, and I think Katie was speaking to this a bit as well, forcing the conversation in the public is really important. And I think from two perspectives raises awareness for those who are not understanding why rates are the way they are and especially because public utilities commissions tend to take this away from local government, it's important for folks to know that because they need to know where to apply pressure and they know that conversation is coming and that should have some effect on behavior. Does it transform it? No. But is it a factor that needs to be considered when they're considering their approach? Absolutely. And us being willing to say, no matter how uncomfortable it is and no matter how much you don't like it, we're going to have a conversation about what your rates are, what your proposal is in front of the Public Utilities Commission to raise those rates.

And then I'm going to also talk about how much your executives earn. All of that doesn't level the playing field, but again, I think there are factors that need to be considered as they're making their decisions. And there's always cameras in the room when that conversation happens. It is a topic that local news shows up to cover every single time.

Katie Cashman:

Totally. That PR angle of how the utilities are appearing to their customers is really important and making sure that the public is aware of where they're falling short on their targets. I think also the state legislature in Minnesota is working on some bills to improve our ability to regulate outside of just the Public Utilities Commission. So I'm going to shout out Representative Emma Greenman, who's also from South Minneapolis because she's carried a few bills that haven't passed because we haven't had a trifecta in a couple years, but next year really hoping to cap CEO pay of our utilities, especially the part that is paid for by rate payers, also the lobbyist pay. So they're paying their government affairs staff also with rate payer money. There's also a bill at the state legislature to set a statewide 4% energy burden cap, which means that our public utilities commission would be forced to consider energy burden in setting customer rates statewide and make sure no one's paying more than that.

These are really hard things to get done with the amount of lobbyist power and even other actors that are against ... The whole climate advocacy community is not all aligned in all of these strategies, but I do think that they're really important. So we can just raise all of the leverage that we have to hold our utilities accountable and make their work transparent so that we can organize around it.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thanks, Katie and Sean. I always try to fit in one last audience question, so I'm going to try and do that before moving on to our final question and closing out the webinar. We have about five minutes, but we have one audience question someone asking, and this is rude of me because it's a big topic to bring up at the end and say, "Can you give me a short little response to this?" But I am going to do it. But we had one question from an audience member asking for a comment on intersectional issues of corporate power as augmented by AI and data centers. In what ways is people power being diminished by AI? I know that's a huge topic, but if anyone has a short thought about that, or otherwise if you have more thoughts later, we can always follow up over email with our attendees, but curious if that's something, issues around AI data centers, corporate power attached to that, if that's something you're dealing with in your communities.

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Just really briefly, it's a conversation that I think is beginning to start in San Diego. There had been a presumption that the cost of land here being as expensive as it is was going to be a prohibitive factor in data centers coming here. And we've recently heard that that may not be the case, that the speed

benefits of being located in San Diego and potentially the capacity existing could be factors that overcome that cost barrier that we thought was going to protect San Diego from this. And so we are watching that super closely and starting to have conversations about, "Okay, what's the framework that we want to tackle this with?" So the one thing that I would say is, and we were told that pretty definitively, San Diego's too expensive, they will not come here. The cost of acquiring property is just too expensive.

So what I'm saying is no one's safe and so make sure you're planning for it because I think we would've been moving more quickly earlier if we hadn't presumed that we were going to be saved by how expensive San Diego is.

Josh Cox:

My really quick response would be that it doesn't actually change the underlying structure of people power. I mean, these data centers and these huge companies, they still need to get zoning variances. They still need to go through processes that require local approval. And there is more and more of a history, especially here in Louisiana, of these small towns making sure that they extract benefits and have more explicit benefit agreements with the Metas of the world and all of these companies that are doing these AI data centers. And I think that that's a playbook that is very replicable. And so the final thought is that the underlying structure of how you advance your goals, I think it still hinges on people power.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thank you, Josh. And I'm going to do one last lightning round with all of you. What's one resource or helpful tool that you would recommend people check out that could be helpful as they're working on these issues? Let's start with Katie.

Katie Cashman:

I'll just recognize a few organizations in Minnesota. We have Unidos and Unidos is the lead community organizing force in local climate action. And then we have a great indigenous-led organization statewide called the Rise and Repair Alliance that has a big push to stop hyperscale data centers, which are popping up unsurprisingly being proposed near reservation land because indigenous communities are always subject to environmental racism. So I'll just uplift those two organizations, Unidos and Rise and Repair Alliance and also wanted to shout out the work of Run on Climate that is helping municipal elected officials get elected who are running on climate platforms. So it's so important that we have people running for office in every level of government who care about these issues.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thanks, Katie. Josh?

Josh Cox:

I think I would say that I would start by just talking to your neighbors. I mean, truly, I really do believe that the policy prescription is secondary, but understanding who is experiencing what problem. I mean, for us, the organizing magnetic event was a storm where the power was out for two and a half weeks and a ton of elderly people died. But in Minnesota or in San Diego, it could be completely different. But I think finding those catalytic events and then just talking to your neighbors is really what can allow you to then figure out exactly what makes sense in your locale.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thank you, Josh. Sean, one tip or resource... tool.

Sean Elo-Rivera:

Yeah, I would say so if you're someone who is on this call or in this webinar, you're probably a little bit of a nerd and to read and bring in consume information before you do things. So going back to what Katie and Josh talked about and what we talked about building power, before having those conversations with your neighbors, you want a little bit of a handbook I would say two really great books that I think about in terms of organizing, Rules for Radicals, that's old school and then No Shortcuts. I think that's another book that I would recommend for folks to really understand the tactics and strategies and theories behind organizing and maybe could provide a little bit of a roadmap for how to turn those conversations with neighbors into organized power that can then create the change that folks want to make.

Katie Kienbaum:

Thank you, Sean. All right, I think let's get our ... We are over time now, so we're going to pop up our last slide. Thank you so much to the panelists. This was great. I had a great conversation. If I could keep you here forever and keep asking you questions, I would because I have more questions for y'all, but we cannot. I'm sure everyone has to get on with their days, but thank you everyone for being here. We really appreciate it. We did record the webinar today, so we will be sending it out. And if you have questions for the panelists, questions for us, feel free to contact. We'll provide contact email in that email to all the registrants and you can contact us and we'll try to forward that along to the panelists or to appropriate people. We will also share links to the resources we mentioned today, so the Local Energy Policy Toolkit.

We have our Advantage Local Report about local energy ownership. We'll share links to the organizations that Katie mentioned, the books that Sean mentioned, you'll have all of that. And I think that's it from us, but thank you again everyone for joining and please enjoy the remainder of your days. When you exit the webinar, there will be a short survey. We appreciate if you fill that out. It'll help us plan future webinars, but thank you so much and enjoy the day. Bye everyone.