

**REPORT ON THE
CLEAN ENERGY RESOURCE TEAMS (CERTs)
PROJECT**

**PHASE TWO:
ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUPS**

by

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Introduction

This document is the second phase of the 2007 project evaluation of the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs). While the first phase of the report analyzed the results of an online survey of CERTs participants conducted in January 2007, this report is an analysis of focus group discussions with team members from each of the six regions (Central, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, and West Central). These focus group discussions took place between December 2006 and June 2007, with Dr. Angela High-Pippert and Dr. Steven M. Hoffman serving as moderators of these discussions. CERTs staff made all other arrangements for the focus groups, including scheduling and recruiting of participants.

Four main themes emerged across the focus group discussions: recruitment and outreach, distance and geography, staffing, and “talk” vs. “action.” This report will discuss each in turn.

I. Recruitment and Outreach

While some focus group participants recalled being recruited into CERTs by a particular individual or task force, many more participants had an understandably vague recollection of how they were initially recruited into the organization. For most participants, however, their recruitment was linked to another organization in which they were involved:

Who started begging...? There were a couple of initiatives that a number of us were working on anyway and this CERTs thing came along, and to me it looked like a good opportunity to further the partnerships that were started on some other projects, and I think it's worked very well in furthering more partnerships beyond what we're currently doing in the northeast... (Northeast)

I had been involved with ReNEW Northfield. When we heard about the first CERTs meeting, Bruce Anderson, who founded that group, and I came to Owatonna. We found it very interesting, meeting other folks who were doing interesting things...and this whole southeast Minnesota area is someplace that I've been drawn to in terms of these renewable resources, too...So just coming from a similar smaller group in Northfield, and then coming out to a regional group and finding other regions connected up into the statewide CERTs, realizing how well this is as a forum, and that you can learn different things that are going on... (Southeast)

I actually don't remember how it started or how we got invited to the first meeting, but we jumped right in at the beginning, and but I think what's

unique about CERTs and I'm glad we went because we've gone ever since and so has everyone else. I mean this model has been followed in the past where you try to get a bunch of expertise together around a particular issue and lots of time it just falls apart. People just quit coming but with CERTS it hasn't. I think it's gained strength...(Northeast)

According to focus group participants, CERTs was perceived as offering opportunities for fostering partnerships with other initiatives, as well as a time and place for the sharing of information and expertise about a wide range of energy issues. Obviously, participants who have remained involved with CERTs found these opportunities to be productive and worthwhile.

The ability of CERTs to simultaneously encourage broad-based citizen participation *and* expertise was appreciated by focus group participants, as articulated by a member in the West Central region:

One of the things that's really important is that it is largely citizen-based. Anybody can join the effort without necessarily needing to be invited. It convenes a large amount of expertise. I think I was exceptionally impressed at the St. Cloud annual meeting this year, seeing 400-500 people, all sharing an immense amount of expertise in particular areas. And then over time, getting to know all these people face-to-face and knowing where to go in order to collaborate on projects.

This theme emerged in the 2007 online survey as well, when analyzing the open-ended responses to questions about respondents' rationales for viewing CERTs as successful in their particular region and in the state. Responses included "Citizens from the entire state have the opportunity to become involved or informed rather than just a pocket group" and "The meetings are open to anyone interested and doesn't 'hand-pick' people, therefore, getting lots of ideas and empowering more citizens to take action."

The idea of empowering *even more* citizens to take action was also prevalent in the focus group discussions. Thus, many participants emphasized the need for another round of recruitment into the organization. When discussing the perceived successes of CERTs within their region, many of the focus group participants stressed that although they would define CERTs as successful, there is much more work to be done, and many more citizens who need to become involved:

There were five people from Lake City that came to the original meeting and I'm the only one that's been active in it. The other people were business leaders, community leaders, and interested, but don't have time to do anything else. With this organization's success over the last couple of years, it's time to go out and try to re-recruit. Because there's a lot of stuff, a lot of public relations, public information activities that we could do, if we had more people, more resources. (Southeast)

It would be an ideal time right now as alternative energy is a sexy topic...Any group has a tendency to wear itself out over time, especially if it is all-volunteer. So it would be good to bring in new ideas and talent. (Southeast)

The big problem I have with CERTs right now, is that we have a lot of people... who know what's going on with renewables and conservation and all that, but a lot of people we aren't touching, and a lot of people that if we could get to could snowball the thing...and how do we get to those people. I'd be happy to go to a meeting with 200 other people. That would be fun. I mean, I wouldn't have a problem with that. But the most we've had is 30 or 40 in this region. So I think that that is my big issue right now, trying to figure how do we get past where we are. I think there are a lot of people who are very, very interested in it, but they don't know how to access it. (West Central)

Knowing how to access interested citizens is a recruitment issue, and "pulling in more people" and "getting those people to the meetings" came up under multiple lines of inquiry within the focus groups. Many participants seemed to share the view of one CERTs member from the West Central region: "I think once people get to a meeting, I think they'll be back." How to get citizens to their first meeting was considered the problem, and according to the 2007 online survey respondents, increased public awareness of CERTs could be the key. When asked about the future direction of CERTs, open-ended responses included the following mentions of the need for increased public visibility:

Press on in all areas, with an emphasis on more public awareness. I know many people don't know who CERTs is or what they do.

They are unknown in our area by most citizens and even those who are active in energy issues.

More public awareness, including local success stories.

Keep getting the word out.

Try to secure a higher profile in communities.

A few respondents were more specific about the types of people who should be recruited and the manner in which they might or might not be recruited. In the words of two online survey respondents, "It should probably try to pull in people who haven't yet participated. Perhaps it needs to make personal contact with prospects in economic development, engineering, banking, education, etc." and "The 'regular folks' are basically totally unaware of CERTs' existence...the press releases tend to sound like university noise. 'Come to a meeting' is not a very interesting idea to farmers." This

degree of specificity was echoed in some of the focus groups as well, with an emphasis on outreach to small businesses:

It's really hard for a small business. If you own a small business and you have three or four employees, granted it's every quarter, but it's still a block of hours or a half day time. I know of one or two individuals who would like to be regular at meetings but just the nature of they have to make money makes it really hard to dedicate, in some cases, a big part of the day...(Northeast)

I think maybe one of our shortcomings may be the business connection, connections to small businesses. We've tried and had outreach and meetings but it's hard to get people to come. (Southwest)

They're up and down on those business connections. They'll go in spurts then fall back. Real active, then switch. That's what's missing -- business connections. Yes. (Southwest)

Discussions of outreach often overlapped with other relevant themes, such as distance and staffing, as in this exchange from CERTs members in the Southeast region:

I agree with what everyone has said. However, when we had the original Owatonna meeting, what were there, 60 or 70 , 80, 90 people there?

I think the count was 80.

And what do we have, a committee of 15? And that was four years ago, and I hope we've had some impact. So if we had 80 people four years ago, we'd have 2,000,000 or 2,000 or 200 – whatever --if we had a similar meeting...We should look at doing a regional CERTs informational meeting, somewhat like the St. Cloud meeting. But do it as a dog and pony show in the six CERTs areas around the state, so people don't have to drive to St. Cloud. It's a way to bring people together and kind of pump up our numbers a bit. That's my only comment. I like the workings of the group. I agree 100% that if we didn't have staff to do this, it would be dead in the water. You just don't have enough time to do that. And the esprit de corps that we have with this group is good but I don't know that we've gotten information back out to the original people and that we've built on those numbers, although we tried.

II. Distance and Geography

A second potentially significant difficulty for sustaining participation in CERTs concerns the more pragmatic issue of the great geographical distances involved in getting people together for face-to-face meetings in certain regions, particularly in the western portions of the state. This was a recurring theme across many of the focus groups, as the

interplay of meeting attendance and geography was expressed in various terms, including gasoline prices, carbon footprints, and trees planted in order to offset travel to meetings. The connection between meeting attendance, geography, and a sense of ownership was expressed by a focus group participant from the Central region, in two separate quotes:

To me it just seems very distant, because I'm driving an hour and a half to a meeting. If there was a way to have a conference call I would love to hear about it, because I am hugely against carbon, and to get in the car and drive this far...

I'm all for meeting four times a year, or three times a year, because relationships are hugely important. You have to know 'Oh, there's Dan,' so that when you hear him on the phone you can put a name to a face. But to have every meeting, with all this driving...

The impact of geography goes beyond the irony of driving two hours for a meeting about community energy. Although some regions have at least a part-time regional staff person, at least one region is coordinated by the CERTs staff in the Twin Cities. This could create a distance that is more than physical, as these focus group participants from the Northeast and Central regions described:

There are dedicated people, serving locally, and I think it takes a lot of effort for someone to come from St. Paul, up to here...and it seems like the point people for this region are out of St. Paul and they do a great job at coordinating, but it's a long way away...and it's just as far going the other way.

One issue is, if I talk to CERTs, I'm calling the cities so I just...don't know who to talk to...by now maybe I should ...maybe I should look on the website and see if there's a membership list with local people...But there's really no help up here. They're all in Minneapolis...So it's one centralized location which is fine, but there's no...like nobody in my area's heard of CERTs...everybody says huh, they don't know what CERTs is, and they ask what have they done. And I know what they've done statewide but I don't know what they're doing in my area.

CERTs members in the Southwest region had a lot to say about the relationship between meeting attendance and driving distance, as this exchange demonstrated:

Southwest Minnesota is so rural, that this definitely is looked at, because instead of driving, and now with the price of gas, I mean, it's going to be even harder yet to have meetings. So having emails is definitely –

It'll be more important to enhance that, I think, just because of the price of fuel.

One of the things we could look at too, especially during the farm season, is maybe some video conferences, since getting people to come to meetings is...Maybe we could do video conferencing at a half dozen sites, focusing on an issue, for city utilities, or something. Just as a suggestion for a focused meeting.

While some regions emphasized e-mails and video conferences as a way to deal with the distance issue, other regions preferred to maintain the traditional meeting format, but to rotate meetings around in order to accommodate more people.

I guess one thing I was thinking about was talking about the different meetings in different places...the west central seems to be a bit of meetings being in the same place. I think that it might be good if we could move that around. I feel a little bit of an orphan out in eastern west central CERTs. There are people interested in renewables, but there isn't a big project going on, there isn't a big wind thing going on, there isn't a big biomass plant...but people are aware of it, and I think that if we were to have speakers there it would raise the level of awareness in the area and that might help. I think your idea about putting it in different spaces might be a good way to get out there more. Basically have our name out there, maybe we need more publicity when the meetings happen. Putting it in the papers doesn't even cost anything. And that's a level that CERTs, we've never done, at least something we might want to consider. (West Central)

If Winona has 270 people attend a small wind conference in Lewiston, would we do 1000 here in Rochester or is it too far for people to drive? I mean, do you have to do things on a smaller county basis or multi-county basis or could we do something on a regional basis? (Southeast)

III. Staffing

Both the 2007 online survey and the focus group protocol asked about the need for additional staffing, particularly at the regional level. Analyses of the surveys and the focus groups indicate strong support for additional staffing, with only a small minority of participants anticipating any negative aspects to additional staff. As one focus group participant from the Northeast region noted, "The next step is to build on all this momentum. The ideal is if we could have, in each region, a Lissa and a Joel." This is the main story of any discussion about staffing – the recurring pattern of Lissa and Joel being mentioned by name, with extremely positive comments and praise for their work:

I attribute [the success of CERTs] to three things. One, it's inspirational, positive, happy. You think of groups organized around an environmental issue as often negative or despairing, but this group is not. Two, it's practical. There are wonderful firm agendas at each meeting. Projects to be done. And three, the leadership of Lissa and Joel who make agendas

and keep us on track, keep us happy, have creative agendas and projects. So those are the three things that keep me coming. (Northeast)

I just want to give kudos to Lissa and Joel. They've been really receptive to changing the format of meetings...I give them a lot of credit for being receptive to the group and trying to provide more functional meetings. (Northeast)

What's amazing is they always have the time. I can call them up anytime, and they're not like harried. They're always like, hey, hi there...They don't make you feel like you are inconveniencing them, that's the beauty of it. They respond to emails, et cetera. (Central)

We ought to voice support and thanks and appreciation to the staff – to Susan, to Lissa, to Joel, and Lola – who are doing an amazing, wonderful job, and without them we wouldn't be as successful. (Southeast)

IV. “Talk” vs. “Action”

The last item on the 2007 online survey was an open-ended question concerning the future direction of CERTs. Among those who answered the question, there was a recurring theme of continuing the work that is being done now, as in “We still have a lot to learn about energy. Let's stay on the same path until we know it all.” Other themes included working with and building on the work of other groups, connecting more with people interested in similar technologies rather than those living in the same regions, getting more people involved, and getting more skilled staff, “...since there is only so much volunteers can do, and they are reaching the point where nothing more will be able to be done.” Another theme was incorporating a broader focus on other ways to solve the energy problem, such as exploring the interconnection of energy with other sustainable issues, such as agriculture and transportation. More demonstration projects and more assistance with finding and securing funding was also suggested, as in “...CERTs should work more on implementing clean energy and less on pulling together various officials and just talking about it.” This desire for more of a project-oriented approach was reflected in focus group discussions as well, as this exchange in the Southeast region illustrates:

Personally, I'm an individual who loves to kick the tires of a project. So from that standpoint I would like to see us somehow have something that I can go out and kick the tires...I'd love to see us have a school district that all of a sudden gets this wild hair that they're going to put panels on the entire complex and generate 80 percent of their electricity within the school. The building right here in which we are sitting would be an ideal opportunity for that, and it just drives me nuts that they don't pursue something like that. Whether it's that or whether it's a community that decides to heat its swimming pool with a solar collector, or whatever...

I think boards or committees go through stages, phases, and hopefully logical ones, and that if you look at CERTs, the logical thing was to analyze and map out our resources, and disseminate the information of what we've done in the past. But I want to agree with you, Barry. Now that we've done those things, what is the next thing, and I agree with the kick the tires issues.

As CERTs moves forward as an organization, there is potential for increased tension between members who emphasize the networking and information-sharing aspects of CERTs and members who would like more emphasis on CERTs-identified demonstration projects. When discussing the potential difficulties with sustaining membership in an organization such as CERTs, most focus group participants mentioned the difficulties associated with attending meetings, either because of employment situations or "having so many irons in the fire." However, a few focus group participants acknowledged this tension between "talk" and "action."

I know of one individual who was very active initially and has dropped off. I asked him about it, and he said basically...I have other things I need to do than come up with policies and things like that. He was more project-oriented. (Southeast)

Of course, not every CERTs member views information-sharing and networking as completely divorced from demonstration projects. For some focus group participants, the "talk" clearly leads to "action":

It's been a great learning experience for me, because there is so much talent, expertise, connections, at every CERTs meeting that you learn a ton about this big renewable energy puzzle. And then I think the value of CERTS is with all that talent, and expertise and all those connections, sitting around the table you feel empowered that you could actually, successfully complete a project. I think there's lots of examples that sort of grew out of CERTs that are at various stages of completion. (Northeast)

Even with all of the potential difficulties in sustaining a community-energy organization, CERTs has been remarkably successful at bringing and keeping people in. Community is the thread that runs through the development of CERTs, from the first meeting to the fiftieth meeting, as this focus group participant from the Northeast region summarized:

I don't exactly remember when I was asked to be part of CERTs, but...I was asked to come to one of the meetings and to share some of my experiences . . . which started about 5 years ago, just putting in renewables myself and just gaining that experience. And it seemed like once I had done that, there was a lot of interest within the community and I just felt because the path that we are on from the energy perspective, all the

negatives associated with burning fossil fuels, that it was almost my obligation to help others move in a clean energy direction. So, I think three years ago I was asked to be a part and it's just been wonderful to ...talk to so many people with such a broad depth of knowledge in the field of energy and economics. I mean it's just bringing everybody to the table to chart a new path for the area.

APPENDIX : EVALUATION PERSONNEL

Dr. Angela High-Pippert is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of Women's Studies at the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN). Her recent publications include “‘What a Couple of Sweethearts’: Women Running for Congress in Minnesota” and “See Jane Run: The Minnesota Women’s Campaign Fund” in the last two editions of *Perspectives on Minnesota Government and Politics*, and “A Million Moms, MADD Mothers, and Feminists: Media Coverage of Women Activists” in *Women in the Media: Diverse Perspectives*. She has also published in *Women in Politics* and is currently researching citizen participation in community-based energy projects with Dr. Hoffman.

Dr. Steven M. Hoffman is a Professor and Chair of Political Science and former director of the Environmental Studies Program at the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN) and a Senior Policy Fellow at the Center for Energy and Environmental Policy at the University of Delaware. He has authored several books, including *Power Struggle: Hydro Development and First Nations in Manitoba and Quebec* (2008, with Thibault Martin, University of Manitoba Press); *Governing the Atom: the Politics of Risk* (co-edited with Dr. John Byrne), and is the principal editor for the last several editions of *Perspectives on Minnesota Government and Politics*. He has also published and written numerous journal articles, technical reports, and conference papers, including a number on community energy and the transformation of the electrical system. Dr. Hoffman is active in the politics of Minnesota environmental policy, having served on the Boards of Directors of several state-wide environmental policy and advocacy organizations.