



# Lessons Learned from Twin Cities Climate and Energy Community Engagement Efforts

Phase 1 Report of the Great Plains Institute's Electric Vehicle Education for All Initiative

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# Acknowledgments

## About the Great Plains Institute

A nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, the Great Plains Institute (GPI) accelerates the transition to net-zero carbon emissions for the benefit of people, the economy, and the environment. Working across the US, we combine a unique consensus-building approach, expert knowledge, research and analysis, and local action to find and implement lasting solutions. Learn more at [www.betterenergy.org](http://www.betterenergy.org).

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## Table of Contents clickable

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Intel gathering</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Literature review .....	2
HOURCAR community engagement .....	2
Minnesota Department of Transportation community engagement .....	2
Xcel Energy community engagement .....	3
Interviews .....	4
<b>Summary of findings</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Projects that led to engagement .....	5
Community identification methods .....	5
Engagement and support methods .....	5
Challenges and solutions .....	6
Lessons learned .....	6
<b>Next steps</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	<b>9</b>

## Introduction

Building on decades of progress from electric utilities, corporations, advocates, and state and federal governments, the United States is on a path to dramatically increase transportation electrification. And rightfully so, since the transportation sector is the highest emitting sector of greenhouse gases.<sup>1</sup> With extensive impacts for infrastructure, clean energy, and climate change, President Biden signed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act on November 15, 2021,<sup>2</sup> and the Inflation Reduction Act on August 16, 2022.<sup>3</sup> Both monumental acts provided billions of dollars to electrify transportation across the nation. Electrifying transportation can take many forms—passenger vehicles, buses, trucks, bikes, scooters, and more. Collectively, these modes of transportation are referred to as electric mobility (i.e., moving around by way of electric vehicles).

As a part of the transition to electrify transportation, the Biden administration’s Justice40 Initiative aims to provide at least 40 percent of the benefits from federal investments to disadvantaged communities.\* And while the federal government has provided some guidance to states and others on how to meet Justice40 guidelines, considerable discretion remains. As a result, applicants that meet eligibility requirements for federal funding opportunities will all use different approaches toward providing at least 40 percent of the benefits to communities. There is a risk that many historically marginalized communities will continue to be left behind.

To right historical wrongs that the transportation sector has caused many communities of color and ensure that they can fully access electric mobility benefits, the Great Plains Institute (GPI) launched the Electric Vehicle Education for All Initiative. The initiative seeks to deeply engage frontline and historically marginalized communities within the Twin Cities area to learn firsthand how they perceive electric mobility, identify electric mobility literacy gaps, and provide educational materials to access electric mobility benefits fully.



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\* The federal government defines disadvantaged communities as meeting criteria across six categories including transportation access disadvantage, health disadvantage, environmental disadvantage, economic disadvantage, resilience disadvantage, and equity disadvantage.

# Intel gathering

To better understand the context of community engagement and learn how best to engage frontline and historically marginalized communities on electric mobility in the Twin Cities area, GPI first conducted a literature review. Then, GPI held level-setting interviews with staff from local governments, nonprofits, for-profits, and other entities. The project had three learning objectives for the intel-gathering:

- Develop an understanding of prior and ongoing frontline and historically marginalized community engagement in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.
- Identify lessons learned and challenges that have happened with prior or ongoing community engagement efforts.
- Identify potential partnership opportunities, including with community-based organizations.

## Literature review

Report authors reviewed three primary literature sources detailing engagement with frontline and historically marginalized communities relating to electric mobility in the Twin Cities region:

- *Twin Cities Electric Vehicle Mobility Network: Community Engagement and Outreach* by HOURCAR
- *2021 Minnesota Electric Vehicle Assessment Appendix E: Detailed Public Engagement Process and Feedback Summary* produced for the Minnesota Department of Transportation
- Minnesota Public Utilities Commission Docket 22-266: In the Matter of Efforts to advance workforce diversity, inclusive participation, and equitable access to utility services for Xcel Energy

## HOURCAR community engagement

In February 2021, the nonprofit car sharing organization HOURCAR released *Twin Cities Electric Vehicle Mobility Network: Community Engagement and Outreach*.<sup>4</sup> This report was the culmination of a two-year process beginning in 2019 in preparation for the launch of the Evie Carshare program, a partnership led by HOURCAR, Xcel Energy, the City of Minneapolis, and the City of Saint Paul.

The report highlights significant findings, recommendations, and lessons learned about equitable car share planning and community engagement. As part of their process, HOURCAR established a core partner council of ten community-based organizations serving residents living in majority Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and low-wealth communities to which they hoped to expand car sharing.

Engagement goals included understanding barriers to HOURCAR’s existing carshare services, educating people about electric vehicles, and identifying the needs of communities—especially low-wealth and BIPOC communities—in accessing transportation services. They underlined the need to ensure alignment of project goals with actual community needs and priorities. As stated in the report, “the challenge [is] making this service a community asset and not another tool of displacement.”

The core partner council members were given autonomy and flexibility in their outreach and education methods, leading to unique engagement strategies that served a shared mission.

Key takeaways about the engagement process included the need to center BIPOC voices, consider the capacity of partner organizations, be mindful of engagement bias, and have open and honest communication.

## Minnesota Department of Transportation community engagement

In September 2021, the Minnesota Department of Transportation published the *2021 Minnesota Electric Vehicle Assessment*<sup>5</sup> that built upon the 2019 report *Accelerating Electric Vehicle Adoption: A Vision for Minnesota*.<sup>6</sup> The assessment provided an overview of Minnesota’s electric vehicle landscape and highlighted strategies to increase

electric vehicle adoption. It also recommended state agency actions to meet electric vehicle adoption and carbon pollution reduction goals while centering equity.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation project team gathered public feedback on the draft recommendations before finalizing them. Due to the short project timeline (seven months), the project team only had two weeks to collect feedback from community members and technical experts. In that timeframe, they engaged nearly 200 individuals across six engagement sessions.

According to the report's results, the "Education and Outreach" topic area received the strongest support from attendees. Within that topic area, attendees showed moderate-to-strong support for the following strategies relating to equitable transportation electrification:

- Develop multi-stakeholder marketing campaign(s) targeting BIPOC, low-income, and rural communities
- Provide financial incentives to BIPOC and low-income community organizations for work on transportation electrification awareness
- Partner with racial, gender, and environmental justice community groups on transportation electrification<sup>7</sup>

On the topic of "Equity and Environmental Justice," members of the public also showed reasonably strong support for the following strategies:

- Involve BIPOC and low-income community members at all planning stages and ensure materials are accessible and in multiple languages
- Support improvements in battery technology that reduce human harm in global electric vehicle (EV) supply chains
- Provide income-based subsidies (e.g., charging at multi-unit dwellings and workplaces, car sharing programs)
- Ensure that a minimum percentage of chargers are close to disadvantaged communities, including rural areas and tribal nations
- Prioritize access for BIPOC and low-income communities when planning electric bus routes<sup>8</sup>

Engagement outcomes from the *2021 Minnesota Electric Vehicle Assessment* demonstrated support for the various transportation electrification strategies referenced above. However, the report highlighted that 61 percent of individuals who attended the engagement sessions were White. Only 7 percent of attendees indicated they were people of color.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project team had to conduct all engagements virtually. And while six sessions were held, the report noted that all engagement sessions occurred within two weeks. Furthermore, no compensation or other support was provided to underrepresented individuals to increase their ability to attend and provide feedback.<sup>9</sup>

## **Xcel Energy community engagement**

In 2022, the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (MN PUC) ordered Xcel Energy to engage in community outreach and establish a stakeholder group to advance workforce diversity, inclusive participation, and equitable access to utility services.<sup>10</sup> Xcel Energy met this order by creating an Equity Stakeholder Advisory Group (ESAG) comprised of around 35 organizations and entities working across various sectors directly or indirectly influencing Minnesota's climate change and energy issues.

Monthly meeting summaries of these convenings are submitted publicly to the MN PUC under docket 22-266. These summaries provide insight into current engagement process strategies and the most beneficial strategies to the involved parties. For example, involved parties recommend conducting in-person meetings in community spaces/centers to discuss complex issues in comfortable and neutral settings.

Furthermore, a neutral third party facilitates ESAG, which has helped minimize potential bias and mistrust between participants and Xcel Energy. ESAG also created a central place (via SharePoint) to share relevant resources and meeting notes, fostering collaboration and ownership of this work. Additionally, ESAG members noted their

preference for full group discussion over prioritizing sub-group conversations, given the nature of intersecting and overlapping issues related to climate and energy justice.

## Interviews

GPI identified the following eight entities that—based on previous engagement and preliminary background research—have conducted a significant amount of community engagement on climate- and energy-related issues in the Twin Cities metro area:

- ArkSpring Consulting
- Bellwether Consulting
- City of Brooklyn Park
- City of Richfield
- Clean Energy Economy Minnesota
- Hennepin County
- HOURCAR
- Institute for Market Transformation

Report authors conducted these 30-minute to hour-long interviews virtually, grounding them in the following set of five core questions:

- What projects led you to engage with historically marginalized communities?
- What type of engagement methods did you use? Which one(s) did you find most successful?
- What support, if any, did you provide to communities to enable them to engage in the project(s)?
- What challenges have you encountered while engaging communities? What solutions did you come up with?
- What have you learned through this engagement? How has that influenced your project(s)?

Supplementary questions:

- How did you initiate contact with communities?
- What hourly stipend, if any, did you provide to participants?
- Did certain meeting times work better than others?
- Were people more likely to respond through direct emails, posters, word of mouth, etc.?
- Did you send participants information to review before the meeting? How did you guide discussions on a topic the participants were unfamiliar with? Or potentially opposed to?
- What were your methods of keeping participants informed throughout the timeline of the project?
- Did you have a website participants could use to access resources and/or pose follow-up questions?
- What advice, if any, did participants suggest to help reduce the burden they feel through over-engagement?
- How did you adapt goals to align with community priorities?
- What challenges have you encountered while engaging communities (such as addressing distrust of government)? What solutions did you come up with?

Report authors gained valuable insight into engagement methods, challenges, and lessons learned by identifying and conducting interviews with key actors in this space and developing targeted questions.

## Summary of findings

This summary of findings provides a general overview of the feedback received from the eight interviewed entities. Results are themed according to the five core questions.

### Projects that led to engagement

All entities described different projects that led to community engagement. Some engaged communities to seek input on specific projects, including Xcel Energy's Upper Midwest Energy Plan, City of Saint Paul's Transportation Safety Action Plan, Metro Transit's Blue Line Extension, and the EV Spot Network. Others engaged communities to ensure they could access benefits from programs like the City of Brooklyn Park Health on the Go, US Department of Energy Communities Local Energy Action Program, and Hennepin County's Green Partners Grant Program. Entities also engaged communities to capture historically underrepresented perspectives in planning efforts, including US Census data collection, the City of Richfield's 2040 Comprehensive Plan, city-wide programming, and building performance standards.

### Community identification methods

Existing connections with community groups, partner organizations, and local governments played the most significant role in identifying and successfully engaging the target audience for community engagement efforts. Relying on word-of-mouth connections was another common strategy. Some entities also made data-driven decisions, using resources such as the Council on Environmental Quality's [Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool](#) and [Hennepin County's human vulnerability map](#) to identify where vulnerable populations live.

### Engagement and support methods

Engagement methods included both virtual and in-person activities. The interviewed entities spread awareness through social media platforms, websites, email listservs, and newsletters. Ultimately, they found that face-to-face meetings with their communities were most impactful, whether through door knocking, attending community-based organization events, going to high-traffic areas such as libraries and laundromats and talking with people, or conducting in-person interviews.

The interviewed entities emphasized the importance of going into community spaces rather than expecting community members to come to you.

Underlying these engagement methods was the need to support communities so they could fully participate. Strategies included financial compensation, language translation services, transportation assistance, childcare, and other family resources.

- **Financial compensation:** Entities offered participants gift cards between \$10 and \$100 to complete surveys, interviews, and listening sessions. Some entities also noted that gift cards are easier for participants to receive than stipends, which can impact an individual's tax burden. They provided higher participation stipends (\$10,000 and above) for project partners who actively shaped the engagement efforts.
- **Language translation and interpretation services:** The most common languages requested for translation included Hmong, Spanish, Somali, Oromo, and Karen. Entities regularly provided written translations at tabling events and for surveys. If engaging participants verbally, entities provided interpreters during meetings. One entity also indicated they offer on-demand language support to community members.
- **Transportation assistance:** One county provides year-round bus funding for eligible groups (e.g., schools, nonprofit organizations, community groups, youth groups, congregations, watershed districts, environmental clubs, and cities located within the county) going on environmental education field trips for eligible groups. Pre-approved field trip locations include museums, nature centers, recycling centers, and more throughout the Twin Cities area. The county provides bus funding until the allocation has been spent each year. Providing this year-round service enables more eligible groups the opportunity to build connections with sustainability. It also builds



trust and relationships with groups using the bus funding, which may benefit the county at future engagement events.

- **Childcare and family resources:** Besides offering free childcare for community events, interviewees noted that family-oriented activities and ethnically appropriate food allowed adults with children to participate in engagement activities.

## Challenges and solutions

Even with planning, entities identified challenges they encountered during engagement efforts. Many indicated they heard about engagement fatigue felt by communities, particularly low-income and communities of color. Interviewees also stated that participants of engagement processes expressed frustration with the number of required meetings, the project or decision-making cycle speed, and the extractive uses of their input.\*\*

Interviewees noted that participants wanted to understand how their knowledge and lived experiences would be used in planning processes and that their values would be served. As a result, some entities indicated they were shifting from information-based approaches to models that increase transparency throughout the project.

A few interviewees mentioned their organizations were moving to engagement processes that build capacity and empower communities to lead new initiatives. While they did not have specific examples regarding the community empowerment engagement model, one interviewee suggested using the community ownership model described in [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#)<sup>11</sup> by Rosa Gonzalez with Facilitating Power.

When identifying community groups with which to engage, some entities noted that neighborhood associations do not always reflect the entire community or represent the groups they are trying to engage. They cautioned that having a more direct and granular engagement approach with community members and groups or partnering with trusted local leaders is better.

Selecting an appropriate compensation model was another challenge entities noted in their interviews. One interviewee indicated they adjusted the compensation amount in response to feedback. At the start of the project, they provided \$10,000 each to ten community-based organization (CBO) partners. They later received feedback that the funding was insufficient to meet project demands due to limited CBO staff capacity. Accordingly, this entity reduced its number of partner CBOs to two to offer more funding to each so that they could hire additional staff.

Similarly, another entity noted that existing compensation amounts are often enough to respect an organization or individual's time but are insufficient to sustain long-term impact (i.e., involvement or engagement beyond a project's lifespan). They recommended providing compensation like the amounts offered by the [Midwest Building Decarbonization Coalition](#) (\$3,000 to \$8,000 per year for participation stipends and \$35,000 to \$50,000 for capacity-building).

Another challenge a couple of interviewees noted was overcoming distrust among community members. Several entities indicated that the uprising after George Floyd's murder, combined with impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, led to great distrust between communities of color and governments. They stated that moving away from extractive engagement models (i.e., engaging a community in a manner that only benefits the entity doing the engagement without a feedback mechanism in place), respecting community members, and regularly communicating about the value of community input helped overcome distrust.

## Lessons learned

Many lessons learned surfaced during the interviews and ranged from specific project lessons (e.g., avoid using too many tabling resources) to broadly applicable lessons (e.g., use engagement results in the decision-making).

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\*\* Extractive engagement occurs when the entity conducting the engagement withdraws knowledge or information without any follow-up or explanation of how the information will be used. This type of engagement offers communities little to no sense of ownership or empowerment since it leaves communities unchanged or worse off.

However, nearly all interviewees recommended becoming familiar with a community's priorities and values before initiating an engagement process. They suggested various ways to do this, including attending public events, speaking with the community and local faith-based leaders, reaching out to organizations previously engaged with the community, and reading neighborhood websites to understand what matters to them.

With that background knowledge of a community, it is then possible to identify what is reasonable to expect from the community and whether there is alignment between the project's goals and the community's priorities. If there is no alignment, interviewees stated engaging the community does not make sense. If there is alignment, interviewees strongly encouraged co-creating engagement plans with CBOs or involving other third parties with stronger ties to the community.



## Next steps

While the findings of this first phase are not exhaustive of the best engagement strategies in use, they provide an important framework as GPI prepares to launch phase two of the EV Education for All initiative.

Phase two will focus on contracting CBOs to conduct engagement in environmental justice communities, communities of color, low-income communities, and with disabled people in the Twin Cities area. Using insights taken from the intel-gathering phase, GPI will co-create engagement plans with contracted CBOs with the following goals in mind:

- Understand how frontline and historically marginalized communities think about electric mobility
- Identify electric mobility literacy gaps

GPI will provide technical assistance and other support to CBOs throughout the engagement.

Once the community engagement concludes, GPI will work with the CBOs to prepare educational materials that fill electric mobility literacy gaps. The project's desired outcome is to provide underserved communities with the knowledge they need to benefit from electric mobility fully.

With insights from the intel-gathering and community engagement phases, GPI will develop a national guide highlighting lessons learned while conducting electric mobility education among underserved audiences. While the strategies used in community engagement need to be specific to the communities being engaged, sharing lessons learned from these efforts will benefit similar projects taking shape across the country.



# Endnotes

- 1 “Fast Facts on Transportation Greenhouse Gas Emissions,” US Environmental Protection Agency, updated May 11, 2023, <https://www.epa.gov/greenvehicles/fast-facts-transportation-greenhouse-gas-emissions>.
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- 3 The White House, Inflation Reduction Act Guidebook (The White House, updated September 21, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/cleanenergy/inflation-reduction-act-guidebook/>.
- 4 Shannon Crabtree, Twin Cities Electric Vehicle Mobility Network: Community Engagement and Outreach (HOURCAR, February 2021), [https://hourcar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/TCEVMN-CE-Report\\_Final-20210304.pdf](https://hourcar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/TCEVMN-CE-Report_Final-20210304.pdf).
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- 9 Great Plains Institute and Bellwether Consulting, 2021 Minnesota Electric Vehicle Assessment Appendix E: Detailed Public Engagement Process and Feedback Summary, 4-5.
- 10 Minnesota Public Utilities Commission, In the matter of efforts to advance workforce diversity, inclusive participation, and equitable access to utility services for Xcel Energy (June 21, 2022), 1-2, Docket No. 22-266.
- 11 Rosa Gonzalez, The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership (Facilitation Power, 2019), <https://movementstrategy.org/resources/the-spectrum-of-community-engagement-to-ownership/>.