

Murray County Energy Dialogue



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SUMMARY

In small towns across America, people are grappling with what the national shift towards renewable energy will look like locally. Some see wind and solar projects as an exciting gateway to road improvements, income for landowners, jobs, lower property taxes, and expanded community services. Others view these projects as a disruption to the landscape they love, as big machinery and blinking lights are constructed to benefit developers and power companies. Then, somewhere in the middle, is where most people likely find themselves: unsure about what exactly clean energy could mean for their hometown. There's a clear need for people across this spectrum to learn more about the future of local energy and identify their shared community priorities.

On February 20-22, a diverse group of 18 Murray County community members met at the Silverberg Building in Slayton, Minnesota, to make recommendations to improve how the energy system serves Murray County.

The Murray County Energy Dialogue is the second of a two-community, wind development-focused series of the Rural Energy Dialogues program. Through in-depth, democratic deliberation, this project is intended to offer new opportunities for communities in Greater Minnesota to consider the topic deeply, offer input, and make recommendations about how their communities should move forward.

The project is a collaboration between the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and the Jefferson Center. These dialogues are sponsored by the McKnight Foundation.

Participant Selection

18 participants were randomly selected from a pool of Murray County residents to reflect the demographic makeup of the county in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, education, political affiliation, and more.

Process Overview

Over the two and a half days, participants studied the energy system in detail, identified benefits and drawbacks of expanded wind development in Murray County, and made a recommendation about expanded wind development to their community. The report below is written by participants themselves, outlining the information they studied and the recommendations they made. For more detail, including the information considered and the material generated by participants, please visit:

ruraldialogues.org/murray-county

Speakers

- **Energy Overview & How Development Happens:** Jessi Wyatt & Jenna Greene, *Great Plains Institute*
- **Murray County Finances & Decision-making:** Jean Christoffels & Heidi Winter, *Murray County*
- **Economic Resilience & Wind Development:** Dennis Welgraven, *Murray County*
- **Design Guidelines & Wind Development:** Mark Lennox, *NextEra Energy*

STATEMENT TO NEIGHBORS



// We came together as a diverse group of people from a variety of backgrounds to learn about wind energy in Murray County, an area that is especially well-suited for wind development.

As part of the event, we heard from a variety of presenters who spoke about the positive and negative impacts of wind energy development on Murray County, Minnesota, and the rest of the world. As a group, we explored the benefits and drawbacks to the expansion of wind energy in our area. This was an amazing opportunity to share in discussion, understand the multiple sides of an issue in order to create a more thorough understanding, and hear opinions other than our own. The encouraging and open forum was helpful, productive and interesting.

In the future, we hope to have more opportunities for public dialogue and a shared focus addressing the challenges related to wind development. As a community, we want more high-quality information from local officials about wind energy and have a desire for direct communication from groups involved in wind development—this may include clearer ways for the community to get involved like local boards focused on incorporating public input on these matters. We believe that communication and education are key and that it is important for community members to be curious and informed about wind energy and other issues in our country and beyond.

There are clear benefits to wind energy development, but there is also much more to learn. We hope to see expanded wind development in Murray County, and believe that it will be an overall benefit to the community if we acknowledge the challenges in our policy and ensure that our permitting reflects those considerations.

KEY FACTS ABOUT OUR ENERGY SYSTEM & MURRAY COUNTY

The following were identified by the participants after each expert presentation.

- Wind energy is the cheapest form of electricity generation and is half the cost of coal.
- As of 2019, over 25% of Minnesota's electricity sourced by utilities came from renewable energy, meeting the 2025 renewable energy goal 6 years early.
- Murray County has high potential for wind energy development and electricity generation.
- In Murray County, projects less than 25 megawatts are permitted by the county and projects equal to, or greater than, 25 megawatts are permitted by the state.
- The long-term effects of wind energy are more beneficial for the environment and result in a reduced carbon footprint compared to other sources of electricity generation.
- The process for decommissioning and disposal of turbine parts is currently uncertain.
- It is important to maintain a balance of proper land use and maintain compatibility between planning and zoning.
- Most wind projects are permitted by the state due to the 25 MW cutoff for county-level permitting.
- The production tax acts as a good source of revenue for counties and townships, with all of the tax staying local within the county.
- It is important for counties and the state to secure funds and identify clear processes for decommissioning.

“Most people don’t like change, especially in their own neighborhood. And especially if they don’t feel like they have a say over it, that can be a challenge.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

TOP POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF WIND DEVELOPMENT

The following are the top identified benefits of potential future wind development in Murray County and corresponding possibilities to maximize the benefits as ranked by participants.

A benefit of expanded wind development in Murray County could be...

1. Wind development provides cheaper, cleaner, and safer energy that provides more disposable income for consumers. (13 votes)

To maximize this benefit, we could...

- Invest in improving the physical infrastructure.
- Improve the efficiency of energy production.
- Engage in strong planning.

2. Wind development provides an increase in all-around tax revenue for the county. (13 votes)

To maximize this benefit, we could...

- Allocate funds for start-up households in the county.
- Allocate wind production tax for county projects which save the county money.

3. Wind development provides good-paying jobs that require additional training, increasing residents' income and education for those who choose careers in this field. (11 votes)

To maximize this benefit, we could...

- Increase money spent on research and development of renewables in Minnesota.
- Expand broadband internet.
- Recruit students (from within Minnesota and outside the state) to vocational programs.

4. People would experience overall cleaner air nationwide. (8 votes)

To maximize this benefit, we could...

- Include an international aspect.
- Focus on obtaining community buy-in.
- Get politically involved to promote wind energy.
- Support measures to develop clean energy.

TOP POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF WIND DEVELOPMENT (continued)

5. Wind development grows a younger and larger workforce with more families moving into the community as a result of the influx of new jobs. (7 votes)

To maximize this benefit, we could...

- Ensure that the newer jobs pay well and provide benefits.
- Emphasize young workers to keep the workforce younger overall.
- Expand educational opportunities for younger people.
- Connect people moving to the community with jobs held by people who want to retire.

6. Murray County residents may be able to save income because they have lower energy costs and lower property taxes. (7 votes)

To maximize this benefit, we could...

- Clearly communicate community needs and expectations.
- Increase investments in schools, hospitals, and other aspects of the community.

7. People may feel an increased sense of security knowing that their sources of energy are diverse and reliable. (7 votes)

To maximize this benefit, we could...

- Prepare for an electrified United States, especially locally.



TOP POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS OF WIND DEVELOPMENT

The following are the top identified drawbacks of potential future wind development in Murray County and corresponding possibilities to minimize the drawbacks as ranked by participants.

A drawback of expanded wind development could be...

1. The long-term health effects of wind energy are unknown. (12 votes)

To minimize this drawback, we could...

- Invest more in healthcare and independent research studies.

2. The end-of-life cleanup process, waste, and cost from the decommissioned turbine parts and related infrastructure issues. (10 votes)

To minimize this drawback, we could...

- Look into reusing and recycling turbine parts in other states.

3. The uncertainty of cost and consequences of unforeseen events like decommissioning, legislative changes new rules and regulations, etc. (12 votes)

To minimize this drawback, we could...

- Conduct ongoing review of related policy, rules, and legislation.

4. There are possible legislative changes to the way the wind production tax is distributed locally, which directly impacts quality of life. (11 votes)

To minimize this drawback, we could...

- Develop partnership with other rural counties (Rural Counties Coalition).
- Citizens could get involved in the political process at the state level and contacting public officials.
- Change the mindset of rural Minnesota by making a stand for what we need.
- Require that counties with current production tax arrangement are grandfathered in.
- Share facts and news locally.
- Get state government and local units to experience rural Minnesota and small townships.

5. The energy produced is not staying local—cost savings should be experienced close to where the energy is created. (9 votes)

6. It results in an increased need for road maintenance due to higher levels of industry-related traffic. (8 votes)

To minimize this drawback, we could...

- Charge additional fees to companies for road upkeep.

7. The lack of quality equipment is causing oil to leak. (6 votes)

To minimize this drawback, we could...

- Invest in better equipment.

VOTING RESULTS

The following are the results for the question, “Based on what you’ve learned through this experience, do you feel residents should support expanded/future wind development efforts/projects in Murray County?”

Yes, under most circumstances/whenever possible – 33% (6 votes)

Yes, but only if certain conditions are met/put in place – 66% (12 votes)

No, not under any circumstances – 0% (0 votes)

“I’m still in support of wind energy and what it does for our community. But there’s always room for improvement, and the devil’s in the details. Overall it may be good, but there are things that need to be addressed and concerns that need to be mitigated.”





For those who voted for “Yes, but only if certain conditions are met/put in place,” the following is a compilation of the conditions identified by participants:

- Environmental conditions are considered, locals are included in the process, and the energy companies are transparent.
- They need to last longer before they break down, otherwise they are not worth it.
- More research and education, more towers in other states/countries, better legislation on taxes.
- Keep on top of the issues and continued concerns of Murray County residents.
- Clean up waste and provide cleanup crew with roadwork, allow jobs to be made.
- Protect surrounding wildlife, wetlands, etc. by not putting turbines too close without exception.
- Protect farmland by not allowing too much development and losing viable farmland. Food production is a large issue too, and affecting it to create wind power isn't the answer.
- Reflect on when we have hit our community's limit—know when to quit.
- Most of revenues can stay local and keep our energy prices lower on a scale tied into our production.
- Pursue community buy-in and have clear “rules of the road” with landowners regarding contracts with developers.
- We need setbacks, clean up at end of life, tax income to local use, and local input on where.
- Wind development does not harm Mother Nature.
- Community input—address concerns noted on pollution both from equipment with oil leaks and trash left by workers.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Through our discussions we recognized a number of outstanding questions we had about the wind development process and operation of wind generation facilities that would help us understand the issues more fully:

- Are there any health and/or safety issues for communities and individuals related to the construction or operation of wind generation?
- How has electricity generation happened historically (how did we get where we are today)?
- What are some average statistics related to costs, production and generation, life expectancy, decommissioning per tower over the lifetime (from development through decommissioning)?
- What are production statistics and cost comparisons for wind energy compared to other sources of electrical generation (other than coal)?
- How many utility-scale wind development projects are planned in Minnesota and in the US and what is the maximum number that could/should be built?
- What research exists assessing the costs, benefits, drawbacks, etc., for wind energy in nations that have utilized these longer?
- What future technological advancements, developments, or other future plans are in process that could affect or improve wind development?
- How is the electrical grid controlled, by whom, and where does electricity that is generated here go for utilization?



PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

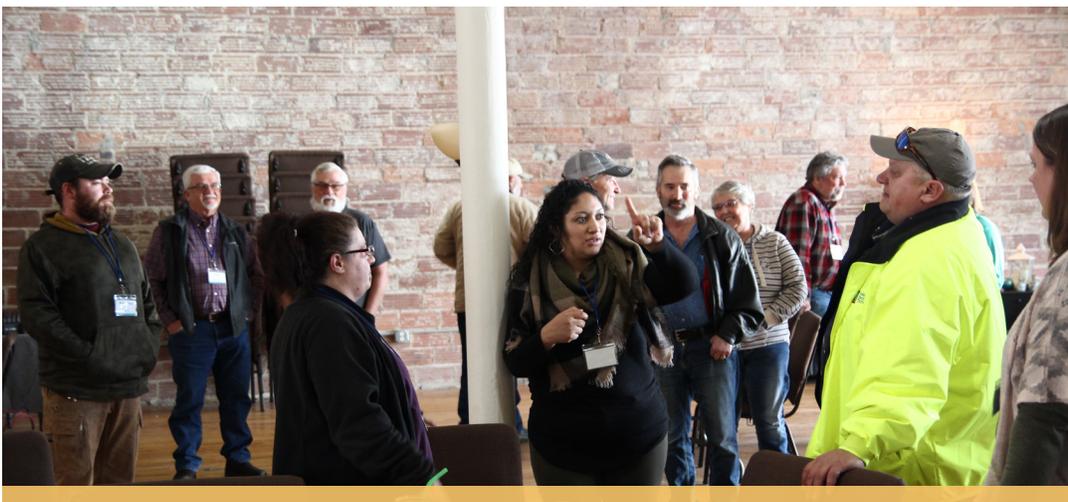


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I really enjoyed the process—I thank everyone a lot. Being new to Murray County it was nice to meet people. I enjoyed the diversity, where we looked at things from different perspectives. It made me have a better understanding of the whole process of wind development.

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It's important to keep the conversation going, and to learn and educate ourselves.



DEMOGRAPHICS

DEMOGRAPHIC <i>All statistics compiled from American Community Survey results unless otherwise noted</i>		MURRAY COUNTY PERCENTAGE	IDEAL # OF PARTICIPANTS	CONFIRMED # OF PARTICIPANTS	ACTUAL # OF PARTICIPANTS
GENDER					
	Female	51%	9	8	8
	Male	49%	9	10	10
RACE/ETHNICITY					
	White/European-American	96%	16	16	16
	Persons of Color	4%	2	2	2
PARTY AFFILIATION <i>Extrapolated from recent election results</i>					
	Democrat	44%	7	3	3
	Independent	–	2	13	14
	Republican	56%	9	2	1
AGE					
	18-39	26%	5	4	4
	40-64	44%	8	9	9
	65 & over	30%	5	5	5
EDUCATION					
	Less than High School	10%	2	0	0
	High School or GED	37%	7	4	4
	Some college	35%	6	9	9
	Bachelor's degree or higher	18%	3	5	5
TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS		100%	18	18	18

Funders

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

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Partners

The Murray County Energy Dialogue was designed and facilitated by the Jefferson Center and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.



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