

Towns to vote on tapping into NH's 'community power' surge

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Programs buy power on the energy market more flexibly than the utilities, which often means savings for their members.

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Time was, you didn't think about where your electricity came from. You flipped a switch and the lights went on.

That is changing. These days, MANY consumers are more invested in where their power comes from and what they can do to reduce their energy consumption — and costs.

That's why a score of New Hampshire communities will be voting at this year's town meetings on whether to adopt community power.

Community power programs allow localities to pool their buying power and purchase electricity in the energy market, instead of relying on their public utility to do that. Because they can be more flexible in timing those energy purchases, participants tend to save money over the utilities' rates, which are locked in twice a year.

What felt like a niche idea just a few years ago is now a full-fledged movement.

Sam Evans-Brown, executive director of Clean Energy NH, calls the exponential growth of community power "a huge deal."

"It's the most exciting thing happening in New Hampshire," he said.

"First of all, just as a simple intervention to save people money on their electric bills, to put dollars back into people's pockets, it's

a great idea," Evans-Brown said. "But more than that, New Hampshire's community power program enables all sorts of innovative stuff that other community aggregation programs in other states don't."

In setting their electric rates,

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The community power movement supplies electricity to customers but doesn't handle delivery. The public utilities say they are not threatened by community power, since they own the infrastructure and deliver the power regardless of the supplier. UNITIL

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customers, Hinkle said. "The cost on the customer's bill represents exactly what we paid those suppliers, so

community power programs can include such innovative approaches as time-of-use rates that reward customers who cut their usage during peak periods, Evans-Brown said.

Some communities, including Keene, Swanzey and Jaffrey, have launched their own community power programs, relying on energy brokers to purchase power for residents and businesses.

But the Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire is the big player on the field.

Incorporated in late 2021, the coalition launched last April with 14 member communities. It now has more than 50 members, including two counties (Cheshire and Merrimack), with 20 more communities poised to come on board later this year.

Brian Callnan, the coalition's first CEO, said he expects CPCNH will be serving 30% of the state by midyear. "We're kind of helping the promise of competition to come to life," he said.

Community power, Callnan said, "is simply local control." Communities join the coalition at no cost and no taxpayer funds are used to set up their programs; expenses are paid through revenues from participating customers.

Callnan said the coalition has a "more active portfolio" than the utilities. "We purchase power when we need to get power and when we feel it's a good time to do so," he said. "That gives us a little more flexibility."

The CPCNH base electricity rate as of Feb. 1 was 8.1 cents per kilowatt hour. That's a 26% drop from its previous rate, and lower than the rates posted by the three public utilities — Eversource, Liberty and Unitil — and by memberowned New Hampshire Electric Co-op.

"There's no profit motive there, no investors," Callnan said. "So we're trying to do it as lean as we can, and pass as many benefits back to our members as we can."

Hampton Falls' agenda

One of the towns considering community power is Hampton Falls.

Carol Schutte, chair of the town's energy committee, moved to New Hampshire three years ago after retiring from the U.S. Department of Energy in Washington. She wanted to give back to her adopted state, so she

there's no markup or profit on energy supply," he said.

As of December, about 37% of Eversource customers were getting their electricity from another supplier.

But even if every customer switched to community power, Hinkle said, "We would still be here."

"We are the ones who own the infrastructure, the distribution and transmission lines, that provide the service," he said. "We're still delivering the electricity even if you're not receiving our supply."

The pitch: More for less

Lisa Sweet serves on the energy committee in her hometown of Rye, one of the 14 founding members of CPCNH.

When the CPCNH launched last April, fewer than 1% of the town's approximately 3,000 electric customers chose to opt out of the program, Sweet said. After three rate periods in which the coalition offered the state's lowest electric prices, customers are happy, she said.

"Nothing is funded through the town or taxpayer revenue," Sweet said. "It's all funded through the rates, and the rates are much lower.

"So you're getting much more and you're paying less," Sweet said.

Sweet, who now chairs the CPCNH's member operations and engagement committee, said she likes the choice that community power offers its customers, who can opt for the cheapest rates or pay more for a plan that includes more renewable energy sources — up to 100%.

"This exists to serve the communities," Sweet said. ""We've saved customers so much money over the less than one year of operation over the utility rates.

Cheshire County was the first county to join the Community Power Coalition.

County Commissioner Terry Clark, who serves as the county's representative on the CPCNH board, said state law was changed in 2022 to authorize a town's selectmen to join a county community power group without going through the town meeting process. So far seven towns in Cheshire county have done that, he said.

helped resurrect the town's energy committee and "got volunteered" to become its chairperson, she said.

Schutte started attending energy committee meetings in neighboring Exeter and Rye to learn about local issues, which is where she heard about community power.

"They talked about how much (money) they saved the town, and it was pretty amazing," she said.

Hampton Falls chose to join the CPCNH, Schutte said, because of its transparency — and the fact that they create a reserve fund for each member community as a hedge against spikes in energy prices.

"So that if electricity gets really expensive, they can use some of the funds so they're not going to charge the member towns as much," she said. "It's a cushion."

Hampton Falls will hold its deliberative session on Tuesday and vote on ballot articles on March 12.

Schutte is Hampton Falls' representative on the CPCNH board. Her pitch to fellow town residents is pretty simple, she said: The Coalition's basic rate per kilowatt hour is 24% lower than the Unitil rate.

"Everybody wants to save money," she said.

Individual residents can choose to opt out of community power and stick with their current electric company. But Schutte hopes even those folks will vote for community power at town meeting. "That will let your neighbor participate and save money," she said.

No threat to utilities

It may surprise people to learn that New Hampshire utilities do not view community power as an existential threat.

William Hinkle, acting director of media relations for Eversource, said the state's largest utility currently has about 77,000 customers enrolled in community power programs, most of them residential.

"It's not a competitive relationship for us," he said.

"The most important thing for us, our priority always, is we want our customers to pay the lowest possible price, whether they're receiving their energy supply from Eversource, a community power group, or an alternative supplier," Hinkle said.

Community power in New Hampshire is "snowballing," Clark said.

"When CPCNH began in earnest around 2020, it started with three towns and one county," he said. "We're now up to 53 towns and two counties just over this last year."

The state law requires towns to hold public information sessions to explain community power to residents, said Clark, a retired marketing executive who has stayed busy going to those sessions during this town meeting season.

What's his pitch to communities?

"... If you take control of your energy purchasing, where you're going to buy it, how much renewable you want, what the price is going to be, it makes for a better life for everybody," Clark said. "And if you can cut \$20, \$40 or \$50 off your electric bill every month, that's not a bad thing."

Conducive climate

Those involved in community power are passionate about making a difference as climate change threatens.

"It's a refreshing feeling," said Cheshire County's Clark.

"While I'm here, if I can actually make a mark and do something about this, that's going to make me feel better," he said.

Schutte from Hampton Falls shares that motivation.

"I think we need to leave things better than we found them," she said.

She's optimistic that community power will be approved in her town, based on the feedback she has heard from fellow residents. "They're enthusiastic to save money, that's a part of it," she said.

But in addition, she said, "It's the right thing to do."

Eversource, which has 457,000 residential customers in New Hampshire, does not make a profit on the energy it supplies to

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