

Starting a Grassroots Climate Protection Initiative: Lessons from the Field **Melrose Energy Commission**

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Introduction

Massachusetts has had an explosion of energy and climate protection-related organizations and commissions form over the past 3 to 4 years. Much of this can be attributed to the rising cost of energy and its impact on city budgets and to growing concern about global warming and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on the individual and societal level. These groups can roughly be divided into two camps: grassroots climate protection organizations (“Citizen Groups”) and municipally appointed energy commissions (“Municipal Groups”). These groups are not mutually exclusive; some communities have both types of groups. While the emphasis of the groups differs, the end result is often the same: energy savings that also lead to a reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

This paper will examine the differences between Citizens Groups and Municipal Groups and then look at how one group, the Melrose Energy Commission, has found a middle way between the two approaches. This is an overview of the existing groups in Massachusetts and is not meant to be a comprehensive list or analysis. The information is based on research conducted online and by interviewing leaders of renewable energy and climate change organizations like the Cape and Island Renewable Energy Collaborative (CIRenew) and the Massachusetts Climate Action Network (MCAN).

Citizen Groups and Municipal Groups

Approximately one-fifth (74) of the 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts now have either a Citizens Group or Municipal Group (see Table 1). Both Citizen and Municipal groups face similar challenges: coming up with realistic goals that will make a difference, motivating citizens and/or the government to act on recommendations, and raising funds to pay for the activities of the group.

Citizen Groups generally take a more comprehensive approach by seeking reductions in energy use and greenhouse gas emissions at both the residential and municipal level. Because of the residential component, citizen groups are also often involved in more public outreach than City Groups, and their outreach tends to include information on how energy use and lifestyle changes can impact a person’s carbon footprint. Lastly, the Citizen Groups are also often members of larger organizations such as ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) and MCAN (Massachusetts Climate Action Network), where they can share information with other like-minded grassroots organizations. Those groups that are members of ICLEI are required to develop climate action plans for their municipality. The climate action plans look at the whole range of activities on both the residential and municipal side, and try to generate community awareness and a plan to reduce GHG emissions.

The activities of Citizen Groups are usually funded through grants from charitable foundations or from local fundraising. They are also eligible for funding from State's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

Municipal Groups are usually comprised of either municipal officials or of municipally appointed volunteers. They are often tasked to look at specific issues that impact the municipality such as the feasibility of installing a wind turbine to power a wastewater treatment plant or at reducing overall municipal energy use. Municipal Groups generally do not concern themselves with reducing residential energy use. Some groups, however, are tasked with a more wide-ranging mandate to examine both energy and sustainability issues such as Smart Growth and recycling. The Town of Barnstable's Green Team is a prime example of this latter type of Municipal Group. The Green Team (with members from all the Town's departments) has been tasked to develop recommendations for how the Town can implement its climate action plan and reduce municipal and community GHG emissions by 20% over the period from 2003 to 2013.

Many municipalities (whether or not they have either a Citizens Group or a Municipal Group) have also signed on to the EPA's Community Energy Challenge and to the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement. The Community Energy Challenge requires signatories to benchmark energy performance in municipal buildings and schools and to reduce energy use by 10% or more. The Mayors Agreement requires signatories to commit to a reduction in Greenhouse Gas Emissions equivalent to the Kyoto Protocol.

The municipality usually funds the activities of Municipal Groups, but they are also usually eligible for funding from State's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

Melrose Energy Commission

The Melrose Energy Commission (MEC) held its first meeting September 2005. The Commission was started by a retired high school science teacher, Bob Lucien, who convinced the Mayor of Melrose that the town needed a group of volunteers to examine municipal energy use and come up with recommendations for how to reduce energy and save money. There are currently about 12 members of the Commission, half of whom joined as a result of a notice placed in the Melrose local newspaper. We do not actively seek new members, but we have not turned anyone away.

The Melrose Energy Commission has found a middle ground between a traditional city-appointed energy committee and a grassroots climate protection group. The MEC is not an "official" city commission in that it does not have a charter or members appointed by the Mayor's office. The MEC held its first meeting about two weeks after Hurricane Katrina, when energy prices began to double. The mission of the group is to save taxpayers money by helping to reduce municipal energy consumption and to educate Melrose residents about energy savings and efficiency opportunities. The members are

all volunteers and are comprised of a surprisingly diverse and talented group including an energy consultant, a municipal official, an environmentalist, an ESCO employee, a retired building manager, among other specialists. We receive strong support from the Mayor, while maintaining a large amount of independence in the projects we pursue. We receive no budget from the City. Unlike more traditional energy commissions we also have conducted a fair amount of community outreach in the form of an annual energy fair and regular feature articles in the local newspaper.

MEC decided early on not to become a member of ICLEI or develop a climate action plan. The decision was based on practical, political and economic concerns. We were a fledgling group that wanted to get some successful projects under our belt by tackling energy efficiency problems in municipal buildings. We felt that developing a city-wide climate action plan would distract and delay us from taking actions that would make a difference in energy use (and secondarily reduce GHG emissions). There was also concern among some members that climate change was still a controversial issue that neither our Mayor nor residents would endorse as a mission for our group. Lastly, the annual membership rate for ICLEI membership was considered prohibitive at a time when our city budget was severely strained.

Over time we have found that our stance on climate change has softened (in part because the Mayor signed onto the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement and because climate change has become more of a “mainstream” issue). We also have changed our position on working with the local synagogues and churches. Originally we declined to reach out to the city’s religious community on energy issues for concern over separation of Church and State. More recently we have decided that as a “quasi-official commission” we don’t have to be so concerned. Indeed, we are currently investigating working with the religious community to increase the funds in the city’s Clean Energy Choice account.

Achievements

The Melrose Energy Commission has accomplished a lot over its two and a half year history in both energy efficiency and renewable energy.

One of our first acts was to enlist a consultant to help analyze the pros and cons of the City purchasing the streetlights from National Grid. The purchase was approved and is expected to save the City about \$100,000 a year. Another early initiative was to begin a comprehensive assessment of municipal energy use including schools, parks, city buildings, streetlights, Department of Public Works facilities, etc. This data has been invaluable both as an educational tool for our Commission as well as for city officials. It has provided us with a benchmark of energy use with which to gauge future energy efficiency improvements. We’ve also been able to use the data to help us apply for grants and to help us qualify for EPA’s Community Energy Challenge.

On the renewable energy front our Commission investigated both wind turbines and solar PV. We did some initial consultations with a consultant on the possibility of installing at least one wind turbine at the highest location in our city to power a municipal golf course,

which is also located at that site. When we applied for Massachusetts Technology Collaborative (MTC) funding for a feasibility study we were informed that the wind was insufficient at that location. Since then we have secured a \$340,000 grant from the MTC's Green Schools Initiative to install 30kW of solar PV at our green Middle School. We are currently investigating installing additional PV on at least one of our elementary schools with possible funding from the MTC's Commonwealth Solar Initiative and money accrued in our Clean Energy Choice account.

Our Commission has also performed public outreach on energy issues through publishing articles in the local newspaper, hosting a booth at the city's annual Victorian Fair, and sponsoring the annual Melrose Energy Fair. This year we held our third and largest energy fair, which is an event designed to create public awareness about opportunities for energy efficiency, renewable energy, home energy audits, and financial assistance for low-income families. The Commission used some of the city's Clean Energy Choice funds to send two middle school teachers to the National Energy Education Development (NEED) conference in Washington, DC and train them in the NEED curriculum which they are using in their classes at the Middle School. We recently won a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection to purchase a dozen Kill-a-Watt energy meters for distribution to the Middle School and High School science classes and for the public library. The meters will help educate students and residents about the energy use of common appliances and how to save energy and money.

Most recently the Mayor has asked the MEC to develop an analysis of existing green building ordinances around the State and to come up with recommendations for such an ordinance for Melrose.

Key Challenges

The MEC has benefited from the support of our Mayor and Board of Aldermen and a group of very talented, congenial and motivated Commission members. That said we face a number of possible challenges including access to city staff and ongoing discussions about the membership and structure of the MEC.

Our Commission has had several discussions lately about expanding our membership (how large is too large and should we accept anyone or just try to fill "expertise gaps") and whether we should remain somewhat independent from the Mayor's Office and Board of Aldermen or strive to become an official Commission.

The initial members of MEC volunteered in response to a notice in the local newspaper. The diverse members seemed to fit all of the initial skills sets and interests of the Commission. Since that time we have sought to invite members who can help us with public relations and publicity as well as grant writing. Solicitations have been made primarily by word of mouth although a notice for the public affairs position was posted online as well as in the newspaper. Our meetings are open to the public, but rarely if ever publicized. As some original members have stopped participating in the Commission we are struggling with how to fill the void or even expand the Commission beyond our

average size of 8 to 12 members. As long as our Commission continues its primary focus on municipal energy savings, the current membership seems adequate. If we were to greatly expand our outreach and efforts on residential energy savings we might need to expand and diversify our Commission membership.

The current quasi-official status of the Commission has several advantages including flexibility in mission and choice of members. Given our strong track record and the enthusiastic support from our current Mayor, our Commission has generally had good access to the Public Works Department, Community Development and other City offices, which makes it easier for us to apply for MTC grants or get access to utility bills and other City information. That said, we are a group of volunteers who meet once a month and it is still a challenge to engage City staff in specific initiatives. Like many municipal departments, staff are strapped for funds and free time is scarce. We have invited staff to attend our meetings, but have had more success in reaching them one-on-one with specific project requests. Another downside is that until recently we have not been eligible to receive an official budget from the City, although the Mayor has indicated that this may change. In essence the issue about our organizational status centers around how best to influence change: within the system or outside it. At the moment the choice seems clear: Mayor Dolan is a strong supporter of our Commission and we are stronger and more effective working with him and the Board of Aldermen.

Table 1: MA Cities and Towns with Energy Groups

Towns	Citizens Groups	MCAN Chapter	Municipal Committees, etc	ICLEI	Mayors Climate Protection Agreement	EPA Community Energy Challenge
Acton	Acton Climate Action	Y				
Acushnet						Y
Amherst		Y	Amherst Energy Task Force	Y		
Arlington	Sustainable Arlington	Y		Y		Y
Barnstable			Green Team	Y		
Belmont	Sustainable Belmont	Y	Vision 21 Implementation Committee	Y		
Billerica						Y
Bolton	Bolton Local		Bolton Energy Committee			
Boston	Boston Climate Action Network	Y		Y	Y	Y
Bourne			Alternative Energy Committee			
Boxborough	Boxborough Local					
Braintree	Sustainable South Shore	Y				
Brewster			Alternative Energy Committee			
Brockton					Y	Y
Brookline	Climate Change Action Brookline	Y		Y		
Cambridge	Cambridge Green Decade	Y	Cambridge Climate Protection Action Committee	Y	Y	Y
Cape Ann	Cape Ann Climate Change Network, Sustainable Cape Ann	Y				
Carlisle	Carlisle Climate Action	Y				
Chelmsford					Y	
Cohasset	Sustainable South Shore	Y	Cohasset Alternative Energy Committee			Y
Concord	Concord Green Team	Y				
Dartmouth						Y
Dedham						Y
Dennis			Alternative Energy Advisory Committee			
Duxbury	Sustainable Duxbury, Sustainable South Shore	Y				
Eastham			Energy Committee			
Easton						Y
Essex	Cape Ann Climate Change Network	Y				
Falmouth	Falmouth Climate Action Team		Falmouth Energy Committee	Y		
Gloucester	Cape Ann Climate Change Network	Y	Renewable Energy Committee	Y	Y	
Greenfield	Greenfield Energy Committee	Y			Y	
Groton	Groton Local	Y				Y
Hanover	Sustainable South Shore	Y				
Hanson	Green Hanson, Sustainable South Shore	Y				Y
Harvard	Harvard Local	Y				
Harwich			Energy Conservation Committee			

Towns	Citizens Groups	MCAN Chapter	Municipal Committees, etc	ICLEI	Mayors Climate Protection Agreement	EPA Community Energy Challenge
Haverhill			Mayor's Energy Task Force			Y
Hingham	Sustainable South Shore	Y				
Hopkinton					Y	
Hull	Sustainable South Shore	Y		Y	Y	
Ipswich	Ipswich Citizens Advocating Renewable Energy					Y
Kingston	Sustainable South Shore	Y	Secure Energy Future Committee			
Lancaster						Y
Lenox	Lenox Environmental Committee	Y		Y		
Leominster					Y	
Lexington	Lexington Global Warming Action Coalition	Y		Y		
Littleton	Littleton Climate Action Network					
Lowell					Y	Y
Lynn				Y		
Malden					Y	
Manchester	Cape Ann Climate Change Network	Y				
Mansfield						Y
Marlborough	Marlborough Climate Action Committee	Y			Y	
Marshfield	Sustainable South Shore	Y				
Medford	Medford Climate Action Network	Y	Medford Clean Energy Committee	Y	Y	Y
Melrose			Energy Commission		Y	Y
Milton	Sustainable Milton, Sustainable South Shore	Y				Y
Nantucket			Nantucket Energy Study Committee			
Natick				Y		
Needham	Green Needham Collaborative					Y
New Bedford					Y	Y
Newburyport	Seacoast Energy and Environmental Design			Y		
Newton	Newton Green Decade Coalition	Y	Renewable Resources Committee	Y	Y	
Northampton	Northampton Citizens for Climate Protection		Northampton Energy Resources Commission	Y		Y
Orleans			Renewable Energy Committee			
Pembroke	Sustainable South Shore	Y				
Pittsfield				Y	Y	
Plymouth	Sustainable South Shore	Y	Plymouth Energy Committee			Y
Provincetown			Recycling and Renewable Energy Committee		Y	
Quincy	Quincy Environmental Network, Sustainable South Shore	Y				Y
Reading			Reading Advisory Committee on Cities for Climate Protection Program	Y		
Rockport	Cape Ann Climate Change Network	Y	Alternative Energy Committee			

Towns	Citizens Groups	MCAN Chapter	Municipal Committees, etc	ICLEI	Mayors Climate Protection Agreement	EPA Community Energy Challenge
Salem	Salem Alliance for the Environment	Y	Renewable Energy Task Force	Y		Y
Sandwich			Resident Wind Turbine Committee			
Scituate	Sustainable South Shore	Y	Scituate Renewable Energy Committee			
Sharon	Sustainable South Shore	Y				Y
Shutesbury				Y		
Somerville	Somerville Climate Action	Y		Y	Y	Y
South Shore	Sustainable South Shore	Y				
Springfield				Y	Y	Y
Sterling	Sterling Local					
Sudbury	Sudbury Earth Decade Committee	Y			Y	
Swampscott			Alternative Energy Committee			
Tisbury			Tisbury Energy Committee			Y
Truro			Energy and Recycling Committee		Y	
Wakefield	Wakefield Climate Action Project	Y	Energy Conservation Committee			
Wales						Y
Waltham	Waltham Concerned Citizens					Y
Warwick						Y
Watertown	Watertown Citizens for Environmental Safety	Y	Environment and Energy Efficiency Committee	Y		
Wellfleet			Alternative Energy Committee			
Westwood						Y
Weymouth	Sustainable South Shore	Y				
Williamstown	Williamstown COOL			Y		
Winchester	Sustainable Winchester	Y				
Woburn						Y
Worcester	Regional Environmental Council	Y		Y	Y	
Yarmouth			Energy Committee			