Community Report Back: Smithers

This document shares a summary of the knowledge and ideas shared at the Community Energy Conversation held in Smithers on February 12, 2025. The conversation was hosted in partnership by The Town of Smithers and Smithers Climate Action and convened 36 community members from Smithers and surrounding communities, including Telkwa and Hazelton.

The Smithers Dialogue showcases a vision for community energy in the north. Key assets include hydroelectricity, solar, and industrial facilities, while actors range from engaged community members to local government staff and elected representatives. Opportunities exist for energy independence and diversification. However, vulnerabilities such as affordability and cultural attitudes and resistance pose significant barriers. Capacity issues, including knowledge and skills gaps and limited local expertise further complicate progress. Prioritizing education and innovation will be essential for navigating these challenges and ensuring a sustainable energy future for Smithers.

Key messages we heard

- Energy Assets: Hydroelectricity, solar, wood, and industrial facilities
- Actors: The Town of Smithers, community members and organizations, industry, and utility providers
- Opportunities: Expanding solar energy, local hydroelectricity projects
- Vulnerabilities: Grid dependency
- Barriers: Skills and knowledge gaps, cultural attitudes and resistance, financial costs of energy transitions
- Priorities: Energy diversification and decentralisation, energy efficiency, waste reduction, active transportation, reducing energy consumption

Northern Regional Energy Dialogues is an Accelerating Community Energy Transformation (ACET) project led by Sinead Earley, Tamara Krawchenko and Kara Shaw in partnership between the University of Victoria and University of Northern British Columbia and with support from the Community Energy Association and Northern British Columbia Climate Action Network (NorthCAN).

We are working with diverse communities and First Nations across Northern British Columbia to help them identify their interests, needs and opportunities in support of renewable energy transitions. The current phase of the project is focused on convening community based and regional energy dialogues. Future phases will support targeted and community-identified capacity building initiatives and help formalise them with enduring peer networks.

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UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA ACET ACCELERATING COMMUNITY ENERGY TRANSFORMATION

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What does energy look like in your community? How is it discussed and what are the greatest concerns?

The conversation held in Smithers, British Columbia depicts a unique landscape in which calls for energy diversification, independence, and minimizing demand and consumption are driving a local energy transition movement.

The Town of Smithers serves as a leader in climate action in the north. In 2021, the Town developed their Community Energy and Emissions Plan (CEEP) targeting emissions reductions in the three priority areas of transportation, buildings, and waste. The Town subsequently hired a Climate Action Specialist to implement the targets and initiatives detailed in the Plan. Between the efforts of the municipality, the Smithers Climate Action Group, local environmental organizations, and community members, the findings of this conversation signal significant momentum towards advancing renewable energy transitions.

The greatest concerns related to energy expressed by participants include reliability, as well as the environmental and health impacts associated with energy generation, residential heating, and emissions-intensive industry activities. As the community relies heavily on hydroelectric power, many participants raised concerns around hydroelectric grid reliability and dependency, primarily the lack of energy diversity, power outages, and grid susceptibility to natural disasters such as floods and wildfires. Drax Canada operates a pellet plant in Smithers where forestry by-products and waste are converted into wood pellets and exported overseas. Additionally, wood-burning is a common source of residential heating. Smoke, air pollution, particulate matter exposure, reduced air quality, and the finite supply of wood were all significant concerns associated with household wood combustion and industry operations. The energy and emissions intensive agricultural industry in the region was also raised as an area of concern.

Participants expressed interest in small-scale and local energy initiatives, with many mentioning solar, run-of-river, geothermal, and waste-to-energy potential in the region. However, questions surfaced around the viability of new energy technologies and battery storage were also posed.

What energy assets and infrastructures exist in your community?

In addition to the primary energy sources of hydroelectricity and natural gas, at the residential level, wood, solar, geothermal, heat pumps, and off-grid homes were all described as existing energy assets. Active transportation infrastructure, including walking and biking paths and electric vehicle chargers were also noted. Industrial energy assets include the Drax pellet plant; however, pellets are exported to serve markets in the United Kingdom. Rail, which allows for transport of energy assets and resources, was also mentioned.

Community members are calling for larger scale, local renewable energy projects including significant mention of harnessing abundant solar and water resources, and district heating. Participants are also looking for ways to innovate with waste-to-energy and circular economy initiatives, with mention of biomass energy, heat capture from industrial facilities, landfill methane collection, and compost conversion.

One comment left by a participant noted the enthusiasm and interest in renewable energy as one of the community's big assets.

Who are the key actors/organizations involved in energy initiatives and projects and what do they do?

Energy providers: BC Hydro, Pacific Northern Gas

Government: Town of Smithers (CEEP and the Active Transportation Plan), Regional District Bulkley Nechako

First Nations: Witset First Nation solar project

Local organizations: Smithers Climate Action, Community Futures Nadina, Climate Café

Industry: Drax, EA Energy Alternatives Ltd., Pacific Inland Resources sawmill, Coastal GasLink, CN Rail, agriculture and food producers

What are the vulnerabilities and barriers around energy in your community? What barriers exist that are preventing your community from moving forward on energy issues and projects? What kinds of capacity barriers exist?

Hydroelectric grid dependency and the lack of energy diversity in the region have left community members increasingly vulnerable to changing climates. As a result, community members are calling for more local grids, locally owned and operated energy systems, and to reduce overall energy demands and consumption at the residential and industrial scale through new technology and increased energy efficiency.

With residential heating and energy being priorities of the community, the cost of energy transitions is a burden felt at the household level. Already faced with a rising cost of living, the high upfront costs associated with initial purchases, coupled with the lack of financial rebates and incentives was a major barrier discussed by conversation participants.

Cultural attitudes, economic development intertwined with resource extraction, and access to information around new technologies work in tandem to prevent the community from advancing on energy transitions. Participants shared that fears of job loss and failure have left members of the community resistant to change. With limited access to knowledge and information, community members are uncertain about which alternatives are better, for example, installing a heat pump versus residential solar. Additionally, notions that “heat pumps are not good in the north” and concerns around battery storage technology have left members of the community questioning whether energy alternatives are a viable option. Access to skilled professionals, equipment, a lack of expertise in high-efficiency home building, and trained technicians for electric vehicles were also noted as barriers.

What are your highest priorities in relation to energy? What does the future of energy look like in your community in 5 to 10 years? What actions and resources are needed to advance these priorities?

Community members are excited about the future of energy in Smithers. Energy diversification, circular economy initiatives, and active transportation are top of mind in the community’s energy vision.

With growing concerns around grid dependency, support for decentralization and local power grids generated by local hydroelectric projects and solar power was high, while stressing the need for minimizing environmental impact in project design.

Participants also expressed interest in shifting the culture around waste and consumption. Experimenting with waste-to-energy initiatives, such as biomass, heat capture from industrial facilities, landfill methane collection, and compost conversion were mentioned as innovative ways to reduce and repurpose waste. Participants also envision a future where consumption at the residential and industrial scales is heavily reduced, and energy efficient infrastructure is the norm.

Participants are seeking improved active transportation within the community and along the Highway 16 corridor. In town, bike lanes and ride-sharing programs were mentioned as priorities. Regionally, participants desire improved passenger train service, shuttles between communities, and organized carpool programs to better connect communities, reduce single-occupancy vehicle travel, and increase access to recreation sites outside of town. Participants also encourage the Town of Smithers, local industry, and transportation providers to electrify commercial and service vehicle fleets.

To advance these energy priorities, the community is calling on the Town of Smithers to lead the charge by hiring more dedicated staff, implementing a sustainability lens in town planning and development, and continuing to implement the strategies detailed in the CEEP. Echoing the CEEP, community members encourage the Town to prioritize efficient buildings, infrastructure, and transportation.

To generate widespread community support for energy transitions, participants highlight the need for more education and workshops, myth-busting campaigns around technology in northern and colder climates, and the need for shared knowledge and understandings around energy. Recognizing the reliance on volunteerism and burnout among local community groups, the conversation heard support for reinvigorating the Energy Centre of the North project (ECN). The ECN would serve as a knowledge hub, housing energy experts who would provide surrounding communities with education, training, workshops, demonstrations, and resources towards advancing alternative energy and energy efficiency while supporting regional capacity building.

Lastly, to overcome the financial barriers to energy transitions, the community recognizes a need for local funding programs and prioritizing investment in renewable energy over fossil fuel industries. Subsidies for low-income households, locally administered rebate programs, and intergenerational funding supports were mentioned. Demand-side incentives and incentives for active transportation were also suggested as tools for generating support within the community.

What would you like to learn from other northern communities?

Participants are interested in hearing success stories from other communities and drawing inspiration from these initiatives, “there are so many good examples at UBCM, no need to reinvent the wheel.” Community members also hope to communicate with and learn from nearby First Nations communities who have implemented successful solar and hydroponics projects. Knowledge sharing, including information, reports, and studies, how to get grants and funding, and demonstrations were mentioned. Participants are also looking for successful tools for engaging local youth in the future of community energy planning.

Beyond learning, participants seek to collaborate with others in the region, with mention of the importance of networking, developing a regional transportation plan, and building solidarity and connections between jurisdictions. As a leader in climate action in the north, community members also want to celebrate their own successes and share what Smithers is already doing.