



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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## Community Report Back: Williams Lake

### February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025

*This document shares a summary of the Community Energy Dialogue held in Williams Lake on February 12th, 2025. The dialogue, facilitated by Emma Swabey from Delve Recycled and Sarah Korn, convened 15 community members. All direct quotes have been reported anonymously.*

*The Williams Lake Dialogue highlights the community's current energy landscape. Key assets include hydroelectricity, solar, biomass, and people power, while actors range from local governments, Indigenous leadership, local organizations, utility providers, and energy service providers. Opportunities exist in expanding solar energy production. However, vulnerabilities such as climate literacy gaps, social resistance, and low public participation pose significant barriers. Capacity issues, including cultural attitudes and limited knowledge, further complicate progress. Prioritizing public engagement, education, and generating community buy-in will be essential for navigating these challenges and ensuring a sustainable energy future for Williams Lake.*

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#### Key messages we heard

- **Energy Assets:** Atlantic Power biomass facility, wood pellet production facility, hydroelectricity, and solar
- **Actors:** City of Williams Lake, Cariboo Regional District, Tsilhqot'in National Government, Fraser Basin Council, Cariboo Chilcotin Conservation Society, Atlantic Power, energy utility providers, local energy installation and service providers, local certified energy advisor
- **Opportunities:** Expanding solar energy production
- **Vulnerabilities and Capacity Barriers:** Climate literacy and knowledge gaps, social resistance and cultural attitudes, and lack of public participation
- **Priorities:** Active transportation, reducing individual and household energy demands and consumption

#### Key recommendations

- **Develop a Collective Community Energy Vision:** Build on the momentum of the Active Transportation Network Plan and invite the community to engage in shaping an energy future through targeted outreach and communications
- **Training and Education:** Provide more information and services for renewable energy adoption, showcase examples of best practices, incorporate climate and energy training among municipal leadership and staff
- **Local Government Funding Programs:** Establish climate funds, grants, incentives, and low interest loan programs



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

The energy conversation held in Williams Lake convened a group of 15 active community members passionate about advancing climate action in their community. The discussion centred around increasing public education and access to information with regards to climate and energy, as well as strategies for encouraging wider participation, particularly amongst industry actors and youth. With the City of Williams Lake and the Fraser Basin Council's ongoing development of the Active Transportation Network Plan, active transportation emerged alongside household energy consumption as key energy priorities of participants.

The main energy-related concern expressed by participants was the lack of community engagement and participation in energy and climate initiatives and discussions. Community members that attended the conversation viewed themselves as the "usual suspects" with regards to local community energy and climate discussions, noting the underrepresentation of industry and youth at past engagements. Participants believed that the lack of public participation in the community can be linked to cultural norms rooted in the resource-based economy of the region, combined with misinformation and a lack of public education resources. Participants discussed the need for resources to improve local climate literacy and tools to foster inclusive dialogue to ensure a resilient energy future in Williams Lake.

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*"...We have to look at each other and say, why aren't they here? Why haven't we been able to communicate?...How do you get them to understand that you share a lot of beliefs and start the conversation there? I think that is excessively important right now. We should not be afraid that we're in a community that has a different viewpoint. Instead, we've got to find a way."*

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Participants also voiced concerns about the environmental impacts and emissions associated with industrial facilities and operations. The Atlantic Power Plant is a local biomass facility that generates electricity from forestry waste and by-product. Due to changes in the forestry industry and declining timber harvests, the availability of fibre supply has decreased, threatening the Plant's long-term operation. While still recognizing the importance of local energy production, participants questioned the sustainability and environmental impacts of transporting fibre from further distances as supply continues to decline. Participants raised additional concern with the competing Drax Canada pellet plant operating in Williams Lake, where wood pellets are produced and exported overseas. Questions around long-term biomass viability, keeping energy resources local, and transitioning away from biomass altogether were posed.

## What energy assets and infrastructures exist in your community?

Participants primarily discussed energy in Williams Lake at the residential level, emphasizing individual and household roles in the energy transition. Alongside connection to the BC Hydro electricity grid, natural gas, propane, wood heat, and residential solar were mentioned with regards to residential energy in Williams Lake. In the community, small scale solar projects such as panels at the recreation centre and solar powered crosswalk signs were mentioned, along with the Atlantic Power Plant.

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*"We decided to think about energy from this real social perspective, and realizing just how many assets in terms of people that we now have locally... People who install heat pumps and solar panels, people who know how to design and build energy efficient homes."*

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A key theme that emerged from the conversations was the asset of people power. Williams Lake benefits from a strong base of local knowledge, skills, and expertise in home building, energy advising, and installation services. Residents are active participants in the energy transition through home energy improvements and renewable installations. Additionally, the presence of local growers, food producers, and community compost programs play an important role in community energy resilience.

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

Several key actors and organizations play important roles in energy initiatives and projects in the Williams Lake area. Local solar and heat pump installers, energy-efficient builders, and energy advisors contribute directly by helping residents and businesses adopt cleaner energy technologies and improve building efficiency. Local and provincial grants and funding programs provide crucial financial support that make energy upgrades and renewable installations more accessible to homeowners, organizations, and businesses.

Industry players also have a significant role. Atlantic Power operates a biomass facility that generates electricity from wood waste, reducing reliance on fossil fuels and diverting materials from landfills. The Drax Pellet Plant produces bioenergy pellets, while forestry companies like Tolko and West Fraser are key stakeholders in land use and biomass supply chains.

Participants also made specific mention of vital role of local government planning departments at both the City of Williams Lake and the Cariboo Regional District in community project approval and permitting.

Several non-profits and community-based organizations are also active in energy-related work. The Fraser Basin Council facilitates local projects such as the current Williams Lake Active Transportation Network Plan. The Cariboo Chilcotin Conservation Society serves as a central hub for environmental education and resources, while groups like Streets 4 All advocate for better transportation infrastructure. Additionally, The Potato House runs an urban compost program, while delivering other projects and public education resources.

## **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?**

The Williams Lake community faces several interconnected vulnerabilities and barriers that hinder progress on energy issues and initiatives. Socially, participants expressed concern around a general lack of energy literacy and public education. The absence of a centralized leadership body or dedicated knowledge hub makes it difficult for individuals to access support, guidance, or resources. Combined with widespread resistance and denial rooted in long-standing cultural norms and skepticism around climate change, participants noted overall low community participation and engagement in energy-related dialogues, with specific mention of the absence of youth and industry players.

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*“We need to each personally ask ourselves, why aren’t we afraid to be in this room? And if we aren’t afraid, how can we help others not be afraid?”*

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Politically, participants felt that the community struggles with a lack of climate literacy among local government leadership, which can lead to uninformed decision-making or low prioritization of energy projects. The four-year election cycle adds instability, as climate-conscious leaders may not be re-elected, causing turnover, interruptions in momentum, and allowing projects to stall.

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*“What Williams Lake has always felt like to me is resource, commodity, extraction...that attitude is very, very thick here...so there’s almost a backlash to the concept of clean energy.”*

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On the financial front, energy affordability remains a concern as the upfront costs of renewable energy projects and investments remains a financial burden for many households. Coupled with the historic resource-based economy of the region, the community struggles to balance the desire for economic development with the need for environmental protection and sustainability.

Lastly, as a community that has experienced damaging wildfires in the past, participants noted the risks of wildfires and extreme weather to critical infrastructure, including energy systems.

## **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?**

The Williams Lake Active Transportation Network Plan was top of mind for participants in terms of energy priorities. Increasing community walkability and sidewalk networks, public transportation efficiency and reliability, and inclusive and accessible low-carbon transportation options—while simultaneously reducing reliance on single passenger vehicles—were all discussed. A few actionable items mentioned include investing in a City electric vehicle fleet, rental bike and scooter programs, and increasing safe storage and road infrastructure for biking.

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*“People don’t necessarily think of the Active Transportation Network Plan as energy per se but it really is because it is reducing our reliance on fossil fuels in a way that some people might not realize.”*

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Another main energy priority amongst participants was shifting community culture and attitudes toward climate and energy solutions. Through increasing public education, myth-busting (e.g. heat pump viability in cold climates), positive messaging, and effective community outreach and promotion of events, participants hope to increase climate literacy and generate future inclusive community engagement. Participants are already acting on this through the development of a community climate action group, that will also serve as the local resource and knowledge hub. Further, participants hope to identify ways to improve climate and energy literacy among elected officials and senior municipal staff.

Participants also support more Indigenous-led and partnered projects and Indigenous leadership in decision making and energy planning. Participants believe that community resiliency and sustainability require prioritizing reciprocity and community-based values, reconnection with the land and traditional knowledge systems, and building a shared sense of responsibility and community.

Among renewable and low-carbon energy options, participants were particularly optimistic about solar energy potential in the region. Participants hope to see solar infrastructure more accessible for households through the development of local funding, grant and incentive programs, such as a local climate action fund administered by the City. Beyond the household level, participants also hope to see more large-scale solar projects in the community and region.

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*“Whether they have a big truck or they don’t, they’re going to see an opportunity...they’re saving money, and they’re increasing the value of their home. It’s like a win, win, and it’s long term and it’s a quick move in the right direction.”*

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Participants also support updated building codes that demand efficient and resilient buildings. This includes new standards that respond to local risks such as extreme heat and offer supports and incentives to developers to meet higher standards. Additionally, participants suggest incentivizing demand-side management at the household level through low-interest loans.

Better management and utilization of wood waste and local circular economies were also mentioned among other priorities.

## What would you like to learn from other northern communities?

Participants were eager to learn from other northern communities that experience similar challenges and opportunities, with specific mention of other hub cities in the north like Quesnel and Prince George.

Participants hope to see more successes and optimistic examples of best practices to inspire local initiatives, with a particular interest in waste to energy projects including wastewater recycling, wood waste, and industrial heat capture.

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*“Why aren’t we showcasing those best examples [and] bringing them in front of council? Maybe it’s lunch and learns.”*

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