



Agenda Item Summary

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Agenda Item Name:

Update on the US Department of Energy Project: Energy Modernization for People, Opportunity, Work, Equity, and Renewables (EMPOWER)

Presenter:

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Description:

Hear a presentation updating the Commissions on project EMPOWER's efforts to address climate change, energy burden, and quality green job opportunities in low-income and marginalized communities.

Recommended Action:

Hear Presentation

Prior Board Motions:

NA

Fiscal Note:

There is no fiscal impact to the BOCC at this time.

Strategic Guide:

Social and Economic Opportunity

Background:

Project Energy Modernization for People, Opportunity, Work, Equity, and Renewables (EMPOWER) is a community-driven initiative to transition Alachua County, Florida, to 100% clean energy in a way that is equitable and benefits all residents. The US Department of Energy selected the project for a technical assistance grant to support the development of a roadmap for this transition.

Project EMPOWER is exploring the potential to develop programs to:

- Reduce energy bills for residents through expanded energy efficiency and weatherization services.
- Develop a pathway to electrification of space and water heating systems.
- Develop solar projects in eligible low-income neighborhoods, potentially linked in a microgrid for climate resilience.
- Incorporate youth internships in the energy efficiency and construction process.

Project EMPOWER engages with neighborhood groups, nonprofits, and local government to build relationships and learn together. Through an exchange of information with residents, the project will educate itself about energy issues and hear from residents about which questions they want to be addressed and the solutions they want to help income-challenged families and develop an equitable transition to renewable energy and climate resilience.

While the project does not provide any funding, it will position our community to develop sound plans that will be eligible for future funding for community-focused programs.

Benefits of Project EMPOWER

Project EMPOWER has the potential to make a real difference in the lives of Alachua County residents by:

- Reducing energy bills for low-income families
- Creating jobs and economic opportunities in the energy efficiency and construction industries
- Making the community more resilient to power outages
- Promoting environmental justice by ensuring all residents benefit from the transition to clean energy.

The EMPOWER program came from a 2021 County-Wide Forum on Transitioning Towards 100% Clean Energy, sponsored by the Alachua County NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Committee (ECJC). After the Forum, a team that included representatives from the NAACP ECJC and the Community Weatherization Coalition (CWC), Alachua County, Gainesville Regional Utilities, and Gainesville Community Reinvestment Area worked together.

The team was selected – one of only 23 US communities and the only one in Florida -- for a technical assistance grant from the US Department of Energy to support community-driven action plans to increase energy resilience, lower utility costs and energy burdens, and provide long-term jobs and economic opportunities in Alachua County (LEAP Communities).

The selected communities worked over 12-18 months with DOE, its national labs and other experts, government and non-governmental partners, community-based organizations, and utilities, as well as environmental, economic development, and equity organizations to develop roadmaps for an equitable pathway to 100% renewable energy, with a focus on marginalized communities that are experiencing economic challenges.

With the technical assistance provided, Project EMPOWER explored the potential to develop programs to reduce energy bills for residents through expanded energy efficiency and weatherization services; develop a pathway to electrification of space and water heating systems; develop solar projects in eligible low-income neighborhoods, potentially linked in a microgrid for climate resilience; and incorporate youth internships in the energy efficiency and construction process.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, Project EMPOWER engaged with neighborhood groups, nonprofits, and local government to build relationships and learn together. Through the exchange of information with residents, we educated ourselves about energy issues and heard from residents about which questions they wanted us to address and the solutions they wanted us to pursue to help income-challenged families and develop an equitable transition to renewable energy and climate resilience. This project will position our community to develop sound plans that will be eligible for future funding for community-focused programs. While we apply for those grants, Project EMPOWER can help

people reduce their energy costs through existing energy efficiency services of the CWC (<https://communityweatherization.org/>) and GRU LEEP program (<https://www.gru.com/MyHome/LowerMyBill/SaveEnergy/Low-incomeEnergyEfficiencyProgramPlus.aspx>).

Summary of Collaborative Efforts with NREL

Since summer 2022, Alachua County's community-led Project EMPOWER (Energy Modernization for People, Opportunity, Work, Equity, and Renewables) has partnered with the U.S. Department of Energy's Communities LEAP (Local Energy Action Program) Pilot. As part of this effort, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) has been working with Project EMPOWER to make advances in the coalition's priority areas of green jobs, solar, and weatherization. Below is an overview of NREL's collaboration with the EMPOWER Team under Communities LEAP.

Scoping

Throughout the summer and fall of 2022, NREL helped facilitate a scoping process with Project EMPOWER to define specific project goals and objectives under Communities LEAP. The scoping process defined the following specific technical assistance areas for Alachua County: 1) community engagement with Project EMPOWER's target neighborhoods; 2) pathway development for the priority topic areas of green jobs, solar, and weatherization; 3) identification of potential funding sources; and 4) a final roadmap to capture project progress and identify next steps.

Community Engagement

NREL supported Project EMPOWER in organizing a kickoff workshop with community members in February 2023. Members of Project EMPOWER and NREL gave an overview presentation of EMPOWER's work and Communities LEAP. Then, workshop attendees broke into three small groups—green jobs, solar, and weatherization—for in-depth discussions. As part of the preparation for this workshop, NREL created an overview factsheet of Project EMPOWER to share with community members.

Currently, NREL is working to get a subcontract in place that will provide more targeted community engagement support and expertise to Project EMPOWER.

Green Jobs

On October 31, 2022, Project EMPOWER and Santa Fe College hosted a roundtable to discuss creating a green jobs pipeline that would include training, internship, and employment opportunities in Alachua County. Following the roundtable, Project EMPOWER helped create a Green Jobs Advisory Council to continue working towards this goal. NREL has worked with the Green Jobs Advisory Council since spring 2023.

Technical assistance provided to the Green Jobs Advisory Council has included a community workforce baseline analysis, training on using Bureau of Labor Statistics data, and more general resource-sharing on clean energy employment opportunities and impacts.

Solar

Solar experts at NREL have worked with Project EMPOWER to brainstorm options for community solar and provide resources related to commercial, community, floating, and residential solar. NREL also connected the EMPOWER Team with representatives from the National Community Solar Partnership, which offers free technical assistance in the areas of 1) policy, legislation, and regulation research; 2) project financing analysis; 3) outreach and engagement strategies; 4) program design; and 5) technical issues.

Weatherization & Energy Efficiency

NREL is currently working with Project EMPOWER to collect data for a small buildings modeling effort that could help identify pathways to achieve higher levels of energy and cost savings.

Funding Opportunities

NREL has worked to keep Project EMPOWER informed of new funding opportunities related to the team's work in green jobs, solar, and weatherization. A subcontract with Elevate Energy provides the EMPOWER team monthly funding updates and tailored guidance on targeted funding opportunities especially relevant to Project EMPOWER.

Roadmap

The final output of Project EMPOWER's collaboration with NREL under Communities LEAP will be a concluding roadmap that outlines project achievements and identifies potential next steps for expanding access to clean energy technologies in EMPOWER's target neighborhoods.