

MERP MINI GRANT CASE STUDY: READING

Municipal Energy Resilience Project (MERP) mini grants fund municipal efforts for capacity building and active participation in energy resilience initiatives.

READING, VT

2020 Census: 687

Median Household Income:
\$47,981

Electricity Spending: \$1,019

Thermal Spending: \$1,939

Transportation Energy
Spending: \$2,763

Energy Burden: 12% (high)

Applied for Grant: March 15

Received Funds: August 29

Event Date: September 16

MERP Mini Grant: \$4,000
Catering: \$2,121.75
Publicity: \$604.50
Remaining: \$1,273.75

BUILDING COMMUNITY - INSPIRING CHANGE

The Reading Energy Board wanted to use their MERP mini grant on space and refreshments for an energy fair. They were aiming for something that would bring together as many community members as possible, said Energy Board member Bill Neukomm. “It’s hard to pass up a good free lunch, especially when you can wrap it around a fun and informative series of events wrapped around it. It was a community event, not just ‘let’s talk about weatherizing and insulating your house.’ We didn’t want to make it a heavy lift for anyone.”

The focus of the event was cost savings and resilience. “We want to eliminate the cost of electricity and reduce the cost of heating fuels,” said Neukomm. Climate change is taking a back seat in messaging. “It’s highly relevant, but not the impetus,” said Energy Board member Brian Cali.

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“Community development was one of the most important aspects of the event,” said Energy Board member Kevin Kaija. “If everybody’s not on board with something that involves money, it can trigger some intense discussions. These types of events generate a paradigm shift about how we live in a climate that’s changing.”

The event drew over 100 people, an impressive turnout for a town of around 600. The first 75 people to arrive and attend a panel or test drive an electric vehicle were given a free lunch, with others filtering in later in the day.

“We all met people we didn’t know,” said Cali. “The event brought in people who were new in town – it extended the neighborliness factor. I met people who had been living in town for seventeen years and I had never met them!”

The agenda included panels of local residents talking about their own heat pumps and solar panels; electric cars and e-bikes to try out; weatherization information; and a booth from Efficiency Vermont with information about incentives. State Senators Alison Clarkson and Rebecca White were both in attendance.





PLANNING & MARKETING

The event on September 16 was about three and a half months after planning began. Marketing included digital marketing, yard signs, local listservs, the town website, and, above all else, word of mouth.

“At first we thought we were going to be doing the cooking, but a caterer came through,” said Energy Board member Paul Doherty. “We had yard signs around town to advertise it three weeks beforehand.”

“Everyone on the committee asked everyone they spoke to if they were coming to the event. Word of mouth is it for small towns.”

CREDIBILITY IS KEY

“We thought homeowners would be more persuasive speakers,” said Neukomm. “They spoke honestly about what worked and what didn’t and what they learned. We’re glad we made that choice.”

“Storytelling is essential in this movement,” agreed Cali. “You have to provide inspiration. It was so helpful having a cross-section of folks from town talking honestly about their own experiences.”

“We worked closely with our RPC, Martha, to plan the event,” said Kaija. “She saw the potential from the grant right away, she knows

Reading and knows how to work with volunteers.”

AGE INCLUSIVE EVENT

“We had the help of a very famous local art teacher who worked with other teachers with the elementary kids to get the kids involved. They made a beautiful poster,” said Neukomm. “Kids made solar ovens and planned to make S’mores for the event. It’s important to get kids involved and included.”

CAPTURING MOMENTUM

“If there’s anything to take away from this event, you have to be able to translate the momentum into positive action,” said Neukomm. “There were some follow-ups. We were able to help some people affected by July’s flooding get back into their homes in an energy-efficient form. The energy fair had an impact on their thinking. These sorts of events reduce the energy barrier.”

LONG-TERM VISION

“If you envision another disaster, we want to try to put the town on a footing that makes it more resilient because it’s less dependent on outside resources,” said Neukomm. This will reduce the likelihood essential services will be disrupted. It’s a long way from making a few town buildings more energy efficient to doing the same for hundreds of private homes, but the municipal buildings are a powerful demonstration that makes taxpayers think more seriously about doing it to their own homes. It’s the multiplier effect we’re hoping for. If we could lower the energy demand from all of the town-owned buildings and install a town-owned array, we can make a pretty sizeable impact for a little town.”

The [Municipal Energy Resilience Program \(MERP\)](http://www.bgs.vermont.gov) provides staff support, application and technical assistance, and funding to increase energy resilience, reduce energy use and operating costs, and curb greenhouse gas emissions by promoting weatherization, thermal improvements, fuel switching, renewable energy, battery storage, electric vehicle charging, and enhanced comfort in municipal buildings. To learn more about how your town can take advantage of a MERP mini grant, visit www.bgs.vermont.gov.