



COOPERATIVE OPPORTUNITY.

PUSHING FOR CLEANER ENERGY



FAIRBANKS CLIMATE ACTION COALITION

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PURPOSE & METHODS

This report was created by Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition's (FCAC) Energy Justice Organizer and eight members of the Renewable Energy Working Group (REWG) who have been most involved in our community work to transition our cooperative electric utility.

Each working group member was interviewed using the same list of prompts, ultimately attempting to answer these questions:

What in FCAC's structure has led to wins in the Golden Valley Electric Association (GVEA) campaign?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of FCAC's organizing structure and how can this be used to succeed in future campaigns?

The report was compiled from working group members' responses and edited collaboratively by the group. Report graphics and visuals were created by FCAC's Communications Team.

List of Acronyms

FCAC – Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition

REWG – Renewable Energy Working Group

GVEA – Golden Valley Electric Association

OBF – On-Bill Financing

MAC – Member Advisory Committee

FAIRBANKS CLIMATE ACTION COALITION

is a community-led grassroots organization working towards climate justice on Lower Tanana Dene lands in interior Alaska. FCAC is grounded in community organizing and guided by Just Transition principles.

LEADERSHIP

FCAC is structured with a leadership Council, working groups, and staff. FCAC's Council is a central decision making body, but members maintain the ability to initiate projects and lead campaigns within working groups, ensuring a broad distribution of leadership within the organization. The Council meanwhile serves to maintain connections amongst all working groups and to ensure our core organizing practices and principles are centered in all decisions and work. Staff organizers support working groups to set strategy and implement campaigns while grounding the work in volunteer leadership and effort. FCAC practices a decentralized leadership model having a leadership team working alongside the Executive Director.

**"MAXIMIZING
EFFECTIVENESS
WHILE NOT DUPLICATING EFFORTS"**

WORKING GROUPS

FCAC's 5 working groups:

- **Keep It In the Ground!**
- **Renewable Energy Working Group**
- **Regenerative Economies**
- **Policy and Politics**
- **and Interfaith Working Group**

Each working group reinforces the Coalition's mission of ending fossil fuel extraction and transitioning to a future of clean energy and equity. Most working groups are supported by an FCAC staff member, but are primarily volunteer led and driven. Working groups support each other's ideas and approach the same larger goal with synergistic paths, all of which are necessary in this work.

The working group structure has been described as "maximizing effectiveness while not duplicating efforts," and "helping you look at the issue [of climate change] through different lenses." Working groups allow FCAC to dig deep with strategic involvement and provide more energy and wisdom for our work.

MORE ON THE STRUCTURE OF FCAC

In discussing FCAC's structure, there were some challenges and growth areas identified. First, being a community-led organization, the capacity of volunteers has been challenging as there are limits to work being entirely driven by unpaid community members. Creation of new FCAC staff positions through the years has brought a different layer to the structure. At the organization's inception, there was more reliance on the Council and other volunteers. Hiring staff has increased organizational capacity providing a reliable, steady presence to guide projects and advance campaigns more quickly. To fight volunteer burnout, staff constantly evaluate the workload of volunteer working group members in hopes of not asking too much. Addition of communications staff positions has also "kept things connected and gotten our work out in the wider world." Another identified benefit of staff expansion is for staff members to fully participate in wider coalition spaces, locally, state-wide, and nationally, and to bring learnings back to FCAC. These collaborations and shared engagement with partner organizations are a key aspect of FCAC.

Another structural challenge is maintaining connections amongst the different working groups. At times, working groups have felt siloed and "working group members don't know what's going on in other groups." FCAC strives to break down these silos through General Meetings which occur twice per year as chances for all members to build relationships and learn together. FCAC has also recently introduced the idea of Member Gatherings, casual opportunities to connect as a larger community.

When asked to describe the core values and practices of FCAC from their own experiences, working group members most often mentioned a grounding in the "Jemez Principles which guide how we organize" and emphasis on a Just Transition. FCAC was described to be volunteer-led and based in grassroots, bottom-up organizing to center frontline communities, uplift marginalized voices, and value local knowledge and solutions. We strive to come together, bringing more collectively than we ever could individually, and encourage people to use their skills and interests to engage fully in community. FCAC builds and tends relationships in all realms, moving at the speed of trust and humanity. Our work comes from a place of justice and equity to encourage action and bring about needed change.

HISTORY

OF THE GVEA CAMPAIGN

One of FCAC's longest standing campaigns has fallen within the realm of the Renewable Energy Working Group (REWG) whose group mission is to advance energy justice and decarbonization and reach 100% renewable energy in the Fairbanks North Star Borough.

One of REWG's main strategies is to organize around our local electric cooperative, Golden Valley Electric Association (GVEA), pushing for energy justice and more renewable energy. GVEA provides electricity for almost 100,000 residents in Interior Alaska.

GVEA's classification as a cooperative, or co-op,

means they are a not-for-profit utility that is governed by a democratically elected Board of Directors. Those who pay electric bills to GVEA are not just customers but instead member-owners, and the 7 Cooperative Principles are considered core values for the utility.

While not always practiced to the fullest extent by GVEA, the opportunity of democratic engagement and care for community, amongst other cooperative principles, relate to the mission and values of FCAC.

THE REWG FIRST GOT INVOLVED WITH GVEA IN 2016

by attending an Annual Meeting which prompted them to consider continued strategies to affect change. Engagement increased in 2018 when a working group member brought to the group's attention an analysis of GVEA's Healy Unit 1 and Healy Unit 2 coal plants and an upcoming open Board seat that had previously been held by a pro-coal person. There was disappointment that GVEA hadn't already been discussing and developing more renewables and was continuing to invest so heavily in fossil fuels. The power and authority of GVEA over energy decisions was recognized as GVEA has institutional power to shift towards more renewable energy at a systems level or utility scale, not just 1 building at a time. Therefore, organizing around GVEA made perfect sense for the REWG because of both GVEA's heavy reliance on coal and the opportunity in shifting away from coal to reduce carbon emissions and mitigate climate change. As of 2021, 91% of GVEA's generation came from fossil fuels while less than 9% came from renewable sources.

The shared recognition that GVEA is a member owned cooperative and, in theory, has to listen to member owners made advocacy there a “strong and natural mechanism to create change out of community desire.”

Getting involved with GVEA was gradual at first, a shift from one-off projects to a larger more focused effort, but quickly became more strategic and more serious until it was REWG's main focus. The group understood that local electricity was coming exclusively from GVEA and the power over those decisions was in the hands of GVEA's Board of Directors.

This led to the development of strategy around 3 main points of the GVEA campaign:

- 1 Member-Owner Engagement and Empowerment**
- 2 Involvement with Elections for Board of Directors**
- 3 Advocacy for Energy Democracy Initiatives.**

MEMBER OWNER

ENGAGEMENT & EMPOWERMENT

Anyone who pays a bill in their name to GVEA is a member owner of the co-op giving them the power to express views and values to GVEA and vote in elections for Board Directors. When the REWG realized that most community members were not aware of what it means to be a member owner, they decided to focus heavily on increasing awareness.

The REWG has seen great success in educating member owners and empowering people to take advantage of their opportunity to engage. Organizing and support led by FCAC staff helped build a base of community members ready to engage with GVEA through sharing comments at monthly Board meetings and GVEA's Annual Meeting and through personal correspondence with Board Directors. Because of REWG efforts, more people know they are a member owner of GVEA and feel empowered to use their voice to affect change in our energy co-op.

ONE OF THE FIRST BIG WINS

in REWG's GVEA campaign was turning out approximately 20 people to comment at an Annual Meeting in 2016 in favor of renewable energy, specifically more solar power. This level of engagement from member owners was unprecedented and GVEA leadership got the message loud and clear and then moved forward on a solar demonstration project. Another early success was advocating for GVEA to adopt a carbon reduction goal which they set in 2019 as 26% carbon reductions by 2030. While REWG recognizes this goal is far too low, the initial adoption of any goal at all was a step in the right direction.

WHAT STARTED AS JUST A SINGLE MEMBER OWNER SHOWING UP TO A GVEA BOARD MEETING HAS, THROUGH REWG'S ORGANIZING EFFORTS, GROWN TO BE A STEADY PRESENCE AT EVERY BOARD MEETING.

REWG has formed relationships with GVEA board members and CEO, and built a dedicated base of people ready to rally around particularly important decisions, where we turn out member-owner comments in even higher numbers. The continued presence of member owners at board meetings, driven largely by REWG efforts, is a visible success and has shown GVEA that the community is watching and is invested in the decisions being made. Large numbers of member owners commenting about climate at each meeting has led to GVEA talking more about climate change themselves, although the action and decision making to back up that talk is still moving slower than hoped for.

WHY PEOPLE SHOW UP

When REWG members reflected upon what encourages people to make comments at GVEA meetings, many responses were shared. People seem to care about energy in times of crisis or time sensitive moments. When people connect the dots between the climate crisis and burning of fossil fuels from GVEA, it encourages them to speak out. People are more likely

to make a comment about a specific topic or decision of GVEA such as electric vehicles, deciding whether to close down a coal plant, or adoption of a carbon reduction goal. The moments where people are most motivated is when they feel they have agency in GVEA's decision making process and believe the importance of what they're speaking out for. People also feel encouraged when lots of people turnout and support something together. Conversely, people can become discouraged when they feel as if they've said everything they can and have been saying it for a long time with no changes being made. To keep morale up, it's important to collectively celebrate wins, small and large.

THE SUCCESS IN INCREASING MEMBER OWNER ENGAGEMENT COMES FROM A VARIETY OF TACTICS

- Diverse working groups of FCAC that connect social justice and climate issues and can stand in solidarity when needed for big moments
- A volunteer-led structure which gives people ownership of group efforts
- Building grassroots efforts through communications across a variety of platforms including social media, emails, press releases, and letters to the editor
- Holding information sessions to educate member owners, generally and on specific topics of interest
- Sending mass text messages and making phone calls to remind the community of upcoming chances to comment at GVEA meetings
- Networking to build relationships and trust amongst group members and the wider community
- Hosting informational tables at larger events to reach a wide audience
- Collectively creating talking points to guide engagement and help people feel confident to comment at GVEA
- Trainings on how to make public comments

BOARD OF DIRECTORS ELECTIONS

Another pillar of the REWG's GVEA campaign has been to focus on elections for Board of Director seats, specifically increasing voter turnout and supporting pro-renewable, value-aligned candidates. It's difficult to measure how much impact the REWG's work has had on GVEA Board elections because of the often underground nature of that work. Working group members described election efforts as "uneasy" and having "tension when board candidates want our help but not overt support." Often, the areas where we could provide the most help aren't always the most strategic ways to engage.

Fairbanks is socially and politically diverse but leans conservative and therefore, loud, widespread support for progressive-leaning candidates is not always the most strategic tactic.

In addition, FCAC's anti-fossil fuel views contrast sharply with the heavy presence of oil and coal in the state, causing a fear from some Board candidates that being publicly associated with FCAC will cause them to be seen as "too radical" or "too green."

THIS CHALLENGE HAS LED TO VERY CALCULATED AND STRATEGIC EFFORTS WHEN REWG ENGAGES WITH GVEA BOARD ELECTIONS. OUR MEASURED APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT IN THE INTERIOR ARE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER PLACES THROUGHOUT THE STATE WHERE MORE OVERT ENDORSEMENTS ARE OFTEN HELPFUL.

Individual outreach such as through phone or text messages has been most effective, whereas widespread communications through social media or other media outlets have been less effective and even caused the opposite outcome of what we were pushing for in certain election years. Often the REWG wants to be more overt in election efforts but decides against it in favor of doing what's best for the supported candidate's chances of winning. Another successful tactic has been to hold candidate forums or publicize written candidate questionnaires where all candidates are invited to answer questions. This gets information out widely without the REWG being too closely associated with any candidate in particular.

There have been certain election cycles when REWG efforts very likely affected the final outcome. In a past election, a pro-renewable candidate won in District 4 after being added to the ballot by petition of member signatures, many of which were obtained due to direct efforts of the REWG. The REWG has also done outreach to identify and encourage candidates to run such as in District 7 when the group identified and financially supported a suitable candidate. Our work to support and maintain pro-renewable candidates has also allowed a pro-renewable individual to be selected as Board Chair, signaling the transition in views of the Board overall.

There have also been cases where some REWG members worried their efforts may have backfired, such as in a previous District 3 election where there is speculation that public association with FCAC's "radical, green views" may have contributed to the candidate losing the election. The REWG learned from that election cycle to approach relationships with candidates with more caution, as well as to take seriously the potential for genuine pushback from pro-fossil fuel interests.

MUCH OF THE REWG'S POWER IN ELECTION EFFORTS STEMS FROM ASPECTS OF FCAC'S STRUCTURE.

- **The large network of FCAC relationships allows us to bring attention to utility Board elections and turn people out to vote utilizing local connections, not just public media.**
- **Our working group members have also volunteered time or donated money to be able to support candidates.**
- **As an organization, we have resources that we can bring even if it's behind the scenes support.**
- **In turn, GVEA Board members recognize the voice of FCAC and have an incentive to be friendly to our views.**
- **We strive to maintain a good relationship with Board members through ongoing and open communication, hold them accountable, and collaborate with them however we can.**

Overall, engagement with Board elections is a fine line to be balanced and an ongoing growth edge.

We've realized that just a few votes can swing an entire election and have therefore approached many election years as chances to educate member owners more heavily instead of directly supporting any candidate.

ENERGY JUSTICE AND OTHER SUCCESSES

In addition to member-owner engagement and Board elections, the REWG has impacted and seen successes in other areas. It must be noted that the REWG has not single handedly driven these successes, only contributed along with other factors.

SOLAR DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

Driven by comments from REWG members and other GVEA members advocating for a shift to renewable energy, GVEA installed a solar demo project in 2017-2018. This solar farm was the largest in Alaska at the time of installation and served as a test of solar in the state.

ON-BILL FINANCING (OBF)

In line with REWG's focus on energy justice, there was a constant push for OBF in early days of commenting. REWG members stated that GVEA wouldn't have considered OBF if it weren't for the group's effort to get the idea on the radar of the Board of Directors. In 2021, a task force of the Member Advisory Committee (MAC) researched and brought a proposal for tariffed OBF to the Board. GVEA is currently undergoing an overhaul of their member billing system, after which they've stated intent to move forward on implementation of OBF.

COMMUNITY SOLAR

REWG efforts driving comments in support of community solar have also influenced creation of a MAC task force to propose a plan to GVEA's Board. The MAC Community Solar Task Force was created in early 2022 with the goal to propose recommendations to the Board by the end of 2022.

ADOPTION OF A CARBON REDUCTION GOAL

The importance of carbon reductions to mitigate climate change has been an underlying message shared from REWG to GVEA for years. The ongoing comments from member owners during Board meetings and GVEA's Annual Meeting stressing this led GVEA to adopt in 2019 a goal to reduce carbon emissions 26% by 2030. Adoption of this goal was a success, driven by the relentless efforts of REWG. Current efforts continue pushing GVEA for accountability to reach the meager goal they've set and leadership to increase this goal to instead aim for 100% carbon reductions and a tangible plan to reach that goal.

ADOPTION OF A STRATEGIC GENERATION PLAN

In 2012, GVEA signed a consent decree with the EPA which allowed them to open the Healy Unit 2 coal plant in exchange for agreeing to make a decision by December of 2022 whether to shut down the Healy Unit 1 coal plant or upgrade emissions technology on Unit 1. Since REWG learned of this deal, they've been organizing and building pressure to encourage GVEA to close down Healy Unit 1. Successful tactics influencing this decision include information sessions, text and phone banking to turnout member comments, and media attention. In June of 2022, GVEA's Board adopted a strategic generation plan which consisted of installing the SCR technology on Healy Unit 1 and instead, choosing to close down Healy Unit 2, a much less efficient unit despite its newer age. Likely because of FCAC, GVEA took on a bigger planning effort than they otherwise would have. Our pressure encouraged them to look long term and make a bigger context decision transitioning away from fossil fuels. This decision happened in large part because the community was asking for it and mirrors REWG's ask for a tangible roadmap to more renewables and higher carbon reductions. A smaller success within this process was GVEA holding a public information session about the decision in direct response to an information session held by REWG and attended by the CEO of GVEA; although GVEA should have held multiple sessions, and should have done so sooner. Overall this was one of the REWG's biggest successes, with the largest impacts on reducing greenhouse gasses, and is largely due to ongoing presence and pressure from the group.

COLLABORATIONS WITH NATIONAL AND STATEWIDE ORGANIZERS

Many of FCAC/REWG's partnerships have supported our GVEA campaign efforts. The REWG collaborates with the Energy Democracy Project nationally to bring ideas for local change and stand in solidarity for energy democracy. REWG members also build collective power statewide by sharing resources and strategizing with local organizers along Alaska's railbelt which covers people served by Alaska's four largest utility co-ops.

TONE SHIFTS & TRANSPARENCY

Due in large part to the REWG's efforts, there's been operational and communication changes at many levels. Since the REWG put the needed energy transition on the agenda of the Board of Directors, GVEA's tone has shifted to recognize climate change. Our work has enhanced public understanding of the role and responsibility of GVEA to mitigate climate change. The REWG emphasis on co-op values and active engagement of member owners has sparked GVEA to take that more seriously themselves and state their values more in their own communications. Ultimately, GVEA's language is acknowledging and using viewpoints that REWG has brought in. Our concerns are reflected, at least verbally if not in all large scale decisions, in comments by many members of the Board which is a success in itself. Finally, the REWG has pushed hard for more transparency from GVEA which, overall, has positively shifted some public processes and governance practices.

OTHER IMPACTS

The REWG has also advocated within GVEA for development of electric vehicles and charging stations, conversations around beneficial electrification, support of Solarize Fairbanks, and serious responses from GVEA to environmental concerns and support for renewables seen in GVEA's own survey of member owners.

CHALLENGES

THROUGH THE REWG'S MANY YEARS OF ORGANIZING AROUND GVEA, WE'VE FACED NUMEROUS CHALLENGES, SOME DRIVEN BY EXTERNAL FACTORS AND SOME DUE TO FCAC'S OWN STRUCTURE.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

A continued barrier is GVEA's business model approach to electricity. REWG has shifted the narrative to make GVEA recognize climate change and

has shown GVEA that implementation of more renewables and battery storage can help them meet their goal to provide affordable, reliable, and environmentally friendly energy; winning on all aspects. This moves past the old narrative that renewables are too expensive and unreliable, something the REWG continues to emphasize to GVEA. However, progress here is slow, with GVEA's actions lagging much behind their words. There is potential for stronger, more visionary leadership in large, long-term decisions that will affect climate change, but to achieve this, GVEA needs to step up and increase community trust. While GVEA has an okay reputation, they will need to have tough conversations and be more transparent and collaborative to achieve the scale of change we need.

There is also an added challenge of renewable energy development because of the climate in Alaska as compared to many other states. Despite numerous studies and applications proving that the technology is developed and is cost comparative, many Alaskans still don't believe it's possible to power Alaska by clean energy. Fossil fuels, historically and still today, are a huge economic influence and play a big role in state and local politics. Working to break down political polarization to implement new ideas is a slow process, even for technologies which are proven.

Another ongoing challenge has been REWG's efforts to elect pro-renewable Board members (discussed more thoroughly above). To recap, this is challenging because REWG sees the value of supporting candidates to get a more aligned vision on the Board but candidates often aren't excited for explicit endorsement from REWG and feel they may be stigmatized from association with REWG, often driving us to work less publicly on elections. Once elected, maintaining positive relationships with some Board members has also been challenging due to their sensitivity that Fairbanks is a conservative community dependent on oil and coal and their unwillingness to push that norm as quickly or aggressively as we hope they will.

The REWG has faced challenges due to GVEA's lack of transparency. While they've made some changes for the better, there's much progress still to be made related to access of public information and accessibility for member owners to participate with the co-op. On the community side, REWG has faced a lack of public interest and knowledge about coops and had to be creative in finding solutions to reach those who don't even know they are member owners, and then, to empower them to care enough to take action. Of course, COVID has caused a unique set of challenges around base building and organizing work with plans being completely shifted due to remote and virtual work instead of in-person efforts for 2 years.

INTERNAL FACTORS

There are certain challenges driven not by external factors, but because of FCAC's own structure and values. At times there can be a tension between what a working group is excited about versus how that fits in with the larger focus and strategy of FCAC. Alignment of campaign priorities and narrative with FCAC's mission and vision has improved with expansion of staff capacity.

Heavy reliance on volunteers has probably been the biggest and most ongoing challenge. Volunteers typically have less capacity, whether that's time, energy, or otherwise, than paid staff to engage in campaigns. Volunteer burnout is a chronic challenge of community organizing and it can be difficult to recruit and maintain new volunteers. Oftentimes, the people who do have the privilege to volunteer do not bring the representation of diverse voices that's needed to solve the climate crisis.

FCAC continues to work towards expanding our volunteer base in more diverse and equitable ways. Working primarily with volunteer leadership, an inherent principle of FCAC, has led to higher turnover and less stability in campaign efforts. In an attempt to solve this, REWG has created committees with consistent members which has led to more productive meetings and work towards specific areas.

FCAC's community-led approach has also faced tradeoffs of a collaborative decision making model involving staff, working group members, and the Council. Consistent with democratic principles, this model works non-hierarchically to gauge interest, give everyone a chance to be heard and influence the outcome of the work, and make decisions in everyone's best interest. However, decision making in a consensus based organization takes more time and can feel like, "an echo chamber hearing the same thing over and over again in different groups." When discussing and deciding upon the same thing in different groups (ie working groups, staff, and Council) the message can shift causing confusion on the ultimate decision.

There have been times when staff struggled to balance the need for quick action and response to urgent situations and full input from all working group members. We continue to overcome this challenge through deep trust built between FCAC staff, Council members, and working groups. While true collaborative decision making isn't always easy, it's ultimately worth the effort even if the process is a bit slower at times.

Finally, FCAC does not always appeal to the majority of people in Fairbanks. Our values “appeal to the liberal end and are seen as a minority issue, not representative of the general public or average Fairbanks person.” Not everyone that we want to include in our work has a shared understanding of our strategy or theory of change. This challenges REWG specifically because it would be easier to have robust efforts around getting member owners to understand their role in transforming the energy system if there were more shared understanding and foundation on organizing strategies.

FCAC has recognized these challenges and works continuously to overcome them. For example, working within the limitations of a conservative town, we've found opportunities for education that are less divisive and confrontational and instead focus on a shared vision for the path forward. This collaborative mindset is seen visibly in REWG's approach to working with GVEA. We've been patient in building relationships of trust and respect with GVEA leadership and have developed consistent messages that align with our actions.

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

WHEN ASKED WHAT ADVICE CAN BE GIVEN TO OTHER ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS WORKING TO AFFECT CHANGE WITH ENERGY CO-OPS, THE ANSWERS WERE NUMEROUS.

- Working group members recommended, first and foremost to, “Remember we’re all in this together. Foster the ‘we’ because it’s not us versus them.” Encourage your co-op to live into their own principles.
- REWG members suggested attending monthly board meetings even just to listen in, and to do so consistently, showing the utility that you are invested longterm in shared success.
- They stressed the importance of developing constructive relationships with Board and staff members and asking deep questions to shift their thinking. This will help co-op leaders hear and respect the opinions and views of all members.
- Provide the public with tools to feel confident engaging with the coop and encouragement that their lived experience is just as important to share as any technical expertise is.
- REWG members advised looking to others for support and inspiration, both other utility co-ops and others organizing for change.
- Many stated the main focus should always be to increase member owner engagement and action.

ALMOST EVERYONE SPOKE TO THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PATIENT AND TAKING THE LONG VIEW AS IT'S HARD TO AFFECT CHANGE IN THE SHORT TERM.

Consider where you want to see your co-op in 5, 10, 20 years and work towards that. First learn and fully understand the utility structure and where the public can engage. Then identify barriers and put together solutions that facilitate the path forward. Even before diving into the GVEA campaign, FCAC had done a lot of work to build community power by starting conversations with different sectors about climate change. The community connections and relationships became the bedrock to build up GVEA organizing efforts. To do utility work without that foundation would be much harder.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Finally, REWG members stressed a much needed commitment to organizing your community. This will allow you to do much more than anyone ever could individually. The power it takes to sway the direction of a utility co-op requires community level engagement and leadership. The priority needs to be on building a movement and empowering people to step in and lead.

