Best Practices Guide for
Community Engagement in Energy Projects



Louis-Charles Vaillancourt

Moe Qureshi

CONSERVATION COUNCIL OF NEW BRUNSWICK

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Authors

Louis-Charles Vaillancourt, Moe Qureshi
Conservation Council of New Brunswick

Conservation Council *of* New Brunswick

180 St. John Street
Fredericton New Brunswick
Canada E3B 4A9

T. (506) 458-8747
E. info@conservationcouncil.ca
www.conservationcouncil.ca

/conservationcouncil /cc_nb

Established in 1969, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick is the province's leading public advocate for environmental protection. A member of the United Nations' Global 500 Roll of Honour, we work to find practical solutions to help individuals, families, educators, governments, and businesses protect the air we breathe, the water we drink, our forests and the precious marine and land ecosystems that support us.

The Conservation Council of New Brunswick wishes to acknowledge the generous funding received from the European Climate Foundation, Environment Funders Canada, and the Ivey Foundation to build this best practices guide regarding community engagement in energy projects.

September 2023

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01 Executive Summary

Opportunities for Best Practices for Community Engagement in Energy Projects

Canada is committed to net-zero emissions by 2050, requiring a transition to renewable energy alternatives. Canadian energy companies will inevitably be required to develop alternative power sources to serve their customers. Projects like wind farms, hydroelectric dams, and solar farms will only become more practical and cost-effective as time goes on.

However, for projects like these to succeed, energy projects must have the support of the community where they will be located. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. As we saw with the Anse-Bleue and Pokeshaw wind farms, both projects failed because the affected communities were either completely opposed or deeply divided about the project *Why Do Wind Energy Projects Fail: The enduring effects of process and distributional unfairness*, for an extensive analysis).

Having witnessed the failures of previous energy projects because of a lack of community engagement, our team set out to gather relevant information about community engagement, successful energy projects and unsuccessful energy projects to establish best practices for community engagement in energy projects.

Three key components of community engagement success were identified: meaningfulness, inclusivity, and timeliness (M.I.T.). Together, these characteristics form a solid base for positive and successful engagement with the potential host community.

02 Introduction

When looking at energy projects proposed in different communities, we can see the response from the community often plays a crucial role in the success or failure of those projects.

The wind farm proposed in Anse-Bleue, New Brunswick, is a perfect example of how poor community engagement can result in a project's failure. On the contrary, we can see several wind projects, such as the Stockyard Hill Wind Farm project (discussed further in the appendix), which has been endorsed by the Clean Energy Council in Australia, are having a greater degree of success because they followed a detailed guide of best practices for community engagement.

Considering this, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick decided to develop a guide for community engagement in energy projects.

This guide integrates the work of the Clean Energy Council (*2018a; 2018b; 2018c; Lane and Hicks, 2019*) with the most relevant principles from other organizations' best practice guides and academic studies (*Rand and Owen, 2017; Sena, 2018; Calvert, McVey, and Kantamneni, 2017*).

This guide's purpose is to provide energy companies with the characteristics of effective community engagement and suggested strategies.

This guide will provide a brief look at the three key characteristics of successful community engagement: **Meaningful, inclusive, and timely (MIT)**, ffollowed by a checklist that energy companies can use to access their community engagement plan. The guide's annex provides examples of how this checklist can be used to assess weaknesses in a project's community engagement plan.

03 Characteristics for Success

- Engage with the community in a valuable and relevant way.
- Build trust through transparent communication and provide easily accessible information.

- Start the engagement process early and maintain continuous communication throughout each phase of the project.
- Address community concerns promptly and involve them in the decision-making processes.

- Clearly define the host community and ensure the inclusion of every stakeholder.
- Meet the community where they are, both physically and mentally, and provide reasonable opportunities for participation.

Meaningful

With meaningful consultation, energy companies can establish a trusting relationship with the community they are seeking to serve. This relationship, as shown in our previous report (Comeau, Gresh and Vaillancourt, 2022), has a massive effect on the success of an energy project.

The United Kingdom's Department of Energy and Climate Change (2015) recommends that energy companies prioritize transparency and accessibility of information. This is achieved by creating a clear structure that the community can use to ask questions and receive responses, such as user-friendly websites, an online peer support network, or an in-person peer support network that uses a community's existing infrastructure. It also recommends ensuring that communication channels between various stakeholders, including government officials, representatives of companies, and affected stakeholders, are open and accessible.

Research also shows that the need for respect and support of the community agency is another important factor contributing to building community trust (*Ross and Day, 2022*). An effective method for accomplishing this involves using an already existing leadership structure in the community to engage the affected stakeholders (*Sena, 2018*).

Transparent Communications

The key to meaningful engagement is transparency throughout the process *(Sena, 2018; Villagrasa, 2023)*. In the case of failed projects, such as the Anse-Bleue's and Pokeshaw's wind farms, local communities lost trust in energy companies due to the lack of transparency surrounding these projects.

As a result, meaningful engagement was impeded, as community members did not have access to information, were not given the opportunity to form informed opinions, and were not given the opportunity to express their concerns. In these cases, a lack of transparency forced the public to seek out missing information independently, which provided an opportunity for misinformation to spread.

The use of a contracted third party to provide the public with transparent information about the project is an effective means of demonstrating transparency while minimizing the spread of misinformation *(Comeau, Gresh and Vaillancourt, 2022)*.

Opening communication channels alone, however, won't suffice. Companies must address all possible community concerns, including visual, noise, traffic, and economic impacts *(Clean Energy Council, 2018a)*. This is crucial since it is the demand side of the equation that impedes progress on new energy infrastructure and not the supply side *(Calvert, McVey and Kantamneni, 2017)*.

Exploring Engagement Strategies

Companies need to create a pathway for meaningful engagement, either through existing social structures or by creating new social platforms for engagement. Those infrastructures, according to Whitford's report for New Brunswick's Department of Energy (2008), should create opportunities for consultation, education, and effective communication.

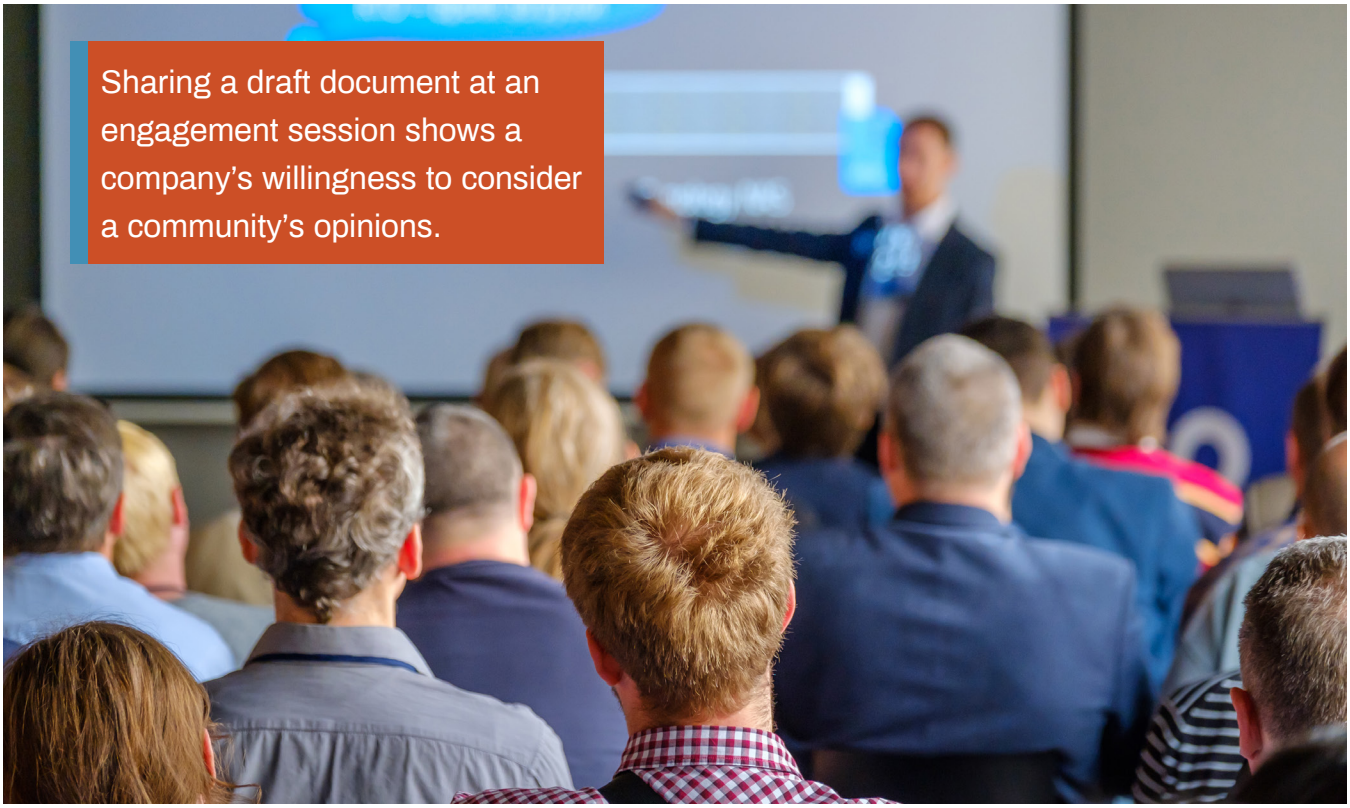
The Clean Energy Council's ***Guide to Benefit Sharing Options for Renewable Energy Projects*** (*Lane, T., and Hicks, J. 2019*) further emphasizes Whitford's conclusions by highlighting the fact that when companies only offer good compensation (money, shared-ownership model, etc.) without meaningful engagement, it often leads the projects to failure. As a result, when the company engages meaningfully with the community, it can offer less compensation, and the community might still accept it since they were engaged.

One way to facilitate this is to bring drafts of documents during engagement sessions. Bringing a draft document to an engagement session shows a company's willingness to consider a community's opinions and not just something the company is saying to sound open-minded.

Bringing an already completed project map gives the impression that the community's concerns won't be considered, while a draft demonstrates openness to community feedback.

Strategies, such as the ones mentioned above, are put in place to avoid what Rand and Hoen *(2017)* call the "Decide-Announce-Defend" framework for energy projects. By showing openness with the different techniques mentioned, the company falls more into the "Consult-Consider-Modify-Proceed" framework, which comes from meaningful engagement.

Taking advantage of proven engagement strategies is crucial for the energy company to reach the community more effectively. In Table 1, best practices and suggested media formats are listed for different types of strategies.



Sharing a draft document at an engagement session shows a company's willingness to consider a community's opinions.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Media Engagement	Print and digital media, press releases, radio shows and council updates.	Leverage existing media relations and networks. Publish regular updates and project milestones to sustain interest and keep the community informed.
Information Campaigns	Social media, flyers, poster sessions, exhibition materials, leaflets, mailer and newsletters.	Clearly identify the target audience. Use plain language and visuals as focal points. Leverage local resources and community partners as delivery networks.
Educational Initiatives	Conferences, public lectures, policy documents, technical reports and peer-reviewed articles.	Manage public expectations early. Clearly define and describe the scope, character and purpose of educational initiatives as merely one stage of a comprehensive community engagement strategy. Make proceedings available to a wider community audience.
Information Gathering	Community, key institutional stakeholders, underserved and under-represented community members.	Survey fatigue can set in quickly. Clearly identify the survey objectives and prune out "nice to have" questions, leaving only "need to know" questions. Organize consultations around events already happening in the community.
Shared Vision	Journey mapping, designed charrettes, visioning workshop, facilitated discussions, stakeholder forums, advisory groups and planning cells.	Manage public expectations early. Try to reach consensus through a clear process. Where there isn't consensus, be transparent. The only thing more detrimental than a lack of consensus is a false sense of consensus.
Empowered Implementation	Delphi technique, design charrettes, citizen's jury, local advisory committees, steering committees, intermediaries and collective impact.	Test the conditions under which community engagement is most likely to lead to successful outcomes for local government, the community and key stakeholders.

Adapted from Calvert, McVey & Kantamneni (2017)

TABLE 2: MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Category	Actions	Yes	No
Transparency	Do all members of the community have access to all project details?		
	Is the information presented unbiased, complete, accurate and balanced?		
	Is the information presented in the language spoken by each community subsection?		
Engagement Platforms	Is the communication structure between the company and the community clearly established and easy to use?		
	Are community leaders being included as a major component of the communication structure?		
	Is there a variety of ways citizens can engage with their peers and the community at large to facilitate discussion, information sharing, and answer questions? (e.g. website, online peer-support network, in-person peer support network)		
	Do engagement methods and structures fit the communication objectives and the project stage? *(See Table 1)*		
Addressing Feedback and Potential Issues	Are all possible concerns addressed in engagement sessions? (e.g. aesthetic impact, noise pollution, increased traffic on major roads, and implications for the local economy, etc.)		

Inclusive

Energy companies must clearly define what constitutes the community, who is part of the community, and ensure they are engaging with the most affected members of the community (Lane and Hicks, 2019). Even though some provincial or federal regulations have weak definitions of the community, it is still the responsibility of the energy companies to look beyond the scope of these limited definitions. As seen in the failed Anse-Bleue project, the energy company followed a weak provincial government guideline that excluded the host community, resulting in a lack of support for the project.

It is vital to meet the community where they are physically and mentally to empathize with the community's concerns and make it as easy and stress-free as possible for stakeholders to engage (Ross and Day, 2022). This means ensuring engagement sessions are accessible, ensuring information is delivered in the appropriate language and at a convenient time for the community, and ensuring technical information is communicated in a manner that non-experts can easily understand.

Additionally, the Canadian Wind Energy Association (2012) recommends that all stakeholders defined as the community are given an opportunity to attend and participate in the engagement and consultation process. Once again, Anse-Bleue provided an example of how important it is to ensure community engagement sessions are accessible to the whole community.

Anse-Bleue delivered invitations to its first engagement session two days before the event. The session was held in English despite the community's main language being French. Furthermore, the session location was located 52 kilometres outside the community (about 40 minutes by car). Because the first engagement session took place on short notice and at an inconvenient location, a large percentage of the community could not attend. As a result, the community felt the company wasn't making enough effort to meaningfully engage, resulting in the project collapsing.

Yet another critical factor energy companies must consider is raised by both the Guelph Community Energy Initiative Task Force *(Calvert, McVey & Kantamneni, 2017)* and the Canadian Renewable Energy Association *(2017)*. It is the company's responsibility to reach out to the community, not the other way around. The company is in a better position as they have the knowledge and resources to create an environment favourable to engagement *(The Canadian Renewable Energy Association, 2017)*.

This cannot be over emphasized. Communities often do not engage with companies when left with the responsibility of educating themselves and reaching out (*Calvert, McVey & Kantamneni, 2017*).

TABLE 3: INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Category	Actions	Yes	No
The Community	Is the concept of "the community" clearly defined and understood by both the company and the community?		
	Does the definition of "the community" include all the possible stakeholders that could be affected by the construction of a project?		
Engagement	Are engagement sessions physically accessible to the whole community?		
	Are engagement sessions planned for each subsection of "the community" to clarify the long-term goals of each group?		
	Does the company's engagement methods accommodate different languages?		
	Does the company's engagement use a variety of mediums to make it accessible to community members with visual or auditory disabilities, learning disabilities or reading limitations? (e.g. text, audio, graphics or video)		
Reach	Is the company making an active community-specific effort to engage, as opposed to waiting for the community to contact them?		
	Is the company offering educational resources (e.g. videos, pamphlets, etc.)?		

Timely

The last aspect to consider is timeliness. The concept of timeliness refers to an engagement process that starts early and continues throughout the project.

First and foremost, this means early consultation. This point is addressed in most of the material reviewed for this guide. The Clean Energy Council *(Lane and Hicks, 2019; 2018a; 2018b)* describes it as an effective approach for providing timely information and addressing community concerns. Whitford's report for New Brunswick's Department of Energy *(2008)* and Calvert, McVey, and Kantamneni's report for the Guelph Community Energy Initiative Task Force also highlights this point.

Calvert, McVey, and Kantamneni's report for the Guelph Community Energy Initiative Task Force *(2017)* asserts that without prior consultation, energy projects lose legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Their research also suggests that early engagement allows energy companies to establish early expectations for community members.

By establishing community expectations, companies have a better chance of success. Whitford's report emphasizes this idea by noting that community engagement that begins after development permits are issued often has negative results.

Early engagement alone, however, won't suffice. Obtaining community support requires continuous consultation throughout the engagement process. According to the Clean Energy Council *(2018b)*, this can be accomplished by ensuring that engagement strategies are in place for each of the six phases of an energy project listed below.

This keeps the affected communities informed, allows the company to quickly address issues, and gives legitimacy to the project due to transparency.

- **Phase 1:** Site Selection
- **Phase 2:** Project feasibility
- **Phase 3:** Planning and approval
- **Phase 4:** Construction
- **Phase 5:** Commissioning
- **Phase 6:** Decommissioning

Early engagement allows energy companies to establish clear expectations for community members.

TABLE 4: TIMELY ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Category	Actions	Yes	No
Early	Is the first engagement session happening as early as possible?		
	Is the first engagement session taking place before a development permit is obtained?		
	Does the timing of the first engagement session give the company enough time to address community concerns?		
Continuous	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Site Selection** phase?		
	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Project Feasibility** phase?		
	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Planning and Approval** phase?		
	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Construction** phase?		
	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Commissioning** phase?		
	Are there engagement sessions before, during and after the **Decommission** phase?		

04 Conclusion

The Conservation Council of New Brunswick promotes renewable energy adoption throughout both the province and the nation. In line with this mission, we present these optimal guidelines aimed at assisting energy companies with their projects, both domestically and abroad.

Our firm belief is that the M.I.T. framework boosts a project's success potential. By actively involving the host community, renewable energy projects can not only gain valuable insights into local needs and preferences but also foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, ultimately contributing to the long-term viability of clean energy solutions and the overall well-being of the community.

1. Meaningful engagement

a. Engage with the community in a valuable and relevant way.

b. Build trust through transparent communication and provide easily accessible information.

2. Inclusive engagement

a. Clearly define the host community and ensure the inclusion of every stakeholder.

b. Meet the community where they are, both physically and mentally, and provide reasonable opportunities for participation.

3. Timely engagement

a. Start the engagement process early and maintain continuous communication throughout each phase of the project.

b. Address community concerns promptly and involve them in the decision-making processes.

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06 Annex

M.I.T checklists can be applied to past projects to provide a better understanding of how the guide's suggested engagement strategies affect an energy project's outcome. In this comparative analysis, we provide two examples of energy projects, one successful and one not.

First, we will examine the **Stockyard Hill Wind Farm**, which is a successful wind project run by Goldwind in Australia. Next, we will examine the failed **Anse-Bleue wind farm project**, which we studied last summer.

The checklists were filled to the best of our knowledge, demonstrating that they can only be used to their full potential by the company responsible for the project.

ANNEX 1 MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Category	Actions	Stockyard Hill Wind Farm	Anse-Bleue
Transparency	Do all members of the community have access to all project details?	A variety of reports are available on the website, along with all the necessary information. Consultations are available upon request.	At first, only people with land the company wanted were contacted.
	Is the information presented unbiased, complete, accurate and balanced?	Third-party organizations (CNC Project Management, AUS Eco Solutions and SMEC) contributed to an Annual Compliance Report made publicly available online.	Although it was not the case, landowners were told other members of the community had already accepted the project. All of the targeted landowners were subjected to the same tactic.
	Is the information presented in the language spoken by each community subsection?	Information was provided in English, Australia's primary language.	Although the community is mainly French, English was the only language offered in the beginning.
Engagement Platforms	Is the communication structure between the company and the community clearly established and easy to use?	A quick exploration of the website reveals multiple communications options and a logical navigation system.	Due to the loss of community trust, the use of a third party did not help the communication structure.
	Are community leaders being included as a major component of the communication structure?	The energy company reached out to community leaders to create a "Community Reference Group," which served as a liaison between the company and the community.	It was initially the responsibility of community leaders to organize themselves to communicate with the company (NAVECO).
	Is there a variety of ways citizens can engage with their peers and the community at large to facilitate discussion, information sharing, and answer questions? (e.g. website, online peer-support network, in-person peer support network)	The community can communicate in a variety of ways, including in person, phone, mail, email and through the "Community Reference Group."	N/A (All relevant information was removed from their website)
	Do engagement methods and structures fit the communication objectives and the project stage? (See Table 1)	N/A	Engagement format was fairly limited, and not adapted to project steps.
Addressing Feedback and Potential Issues	Are all possible concerns addressed in engagement sessions? (e.g. aesthetic impact, noise pollution, increased traffic on major roads, and implications for the local economy, etc.)	The annual report addressed issues raised by the community, such as securing habitat for the striped legless lizard and golden sun moth.	Some of the issues raised by the community were addressed, but not all. (CCNB, 2022)

ANNEX 2 Inclusive Engagement Checklist

Category	Actions	Stockyard Hill Wind Farm	Anse-Bleue
The Community	Is the concept of "the community" clearly defined and understood by both the company and the community?	N/A	The concept of community was inclusive, which allowed Bathurst (roughly 50 km from Anse-Bleue) to be thought of as "the community."
	Does the definition of "the community" include all the possible stakeholders that could be affected by the construction of a project?	The making of a "Community Reference Group" allowed for a diverse and inclusive representation of the community	As community is defined broadly, the people living in Anse-Bleue had little impact on the project.
Engagement	Are engagement sessions physically accessible to the whole community?	Through the "Community Reference Group," a diverse and inclusive representation of the community was involved.	Only people whose land would be directly affected were included in the early engagement session. A meeting for the entire community was held in Bathurst, far from Anse-Bleue.
	Are engagement sessions planned for each subsection of "the community" to clarify the long-term goals of each group?	All of the neighbouring residences are being visited by the project team. The project team is also holding one-to-one meetings on demand, and are willing to arrange presentations for any community group interested in learning more.	Following the Bathurst session backlash, additional engagement sessions were planned.
	Does the company's engagement methods accommodate different languages?	Engagement sessions were conducted in an English-speaking community and in English only.	A French-speaking community initially received the presentation in English.
	Does the company's engagement use a variety of mediums to make it accessible to community members with visual or auditory disabilities, learning disabilities or reading limitations? (e.g. text, audio, graphics or video)	Videos, pictures, and timelapses are available on the website. Additionally, the project team offers one-on-one meetings.	Most material presented was in text, however, some presentations included graphs and PowerPoints.
Reach	Is the company making an active community-specific effort to engage, as opposed to waiting for the community to contact them?	The creation of a "Community Reference Group" shows a willingness to accept community feedback. In spite of this, community members had to apply to become members of the group, which limited the scope of feedback received. Due to this, reaching out in person might have been more effective.	The community of Anse-Bleue had to exert a lot of effort in terms of communication, such as forcing meetings to be moved within the community and asking for translations of documents.
	Is the company offering educational resources (e.g. videos, pamphlets, etc.)?	N/A	N/A

ANNEX 3 TIMELY ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Category	Actions	Stockyard Hill Wind Farm	Anse-Bleue
Early	Is the first engagement session happening as early as possible?	N/A	Not inclusive, but early.
	Is the first engagement session taking place before a development permit is obtained?	N/A	Yes.
	Does the timing of the first engagement session give the company enough time to address community concerns?	N/A	The company failed to provide adequate notice for the initial engagement session. As a result, people from Anse-Bleue had difficulty attending or raising issues. Also, the energy company did not provide adequate time for community members to raise issues.
Continuous	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Site Selection** phase?	N/A	The vast majority of meetings were conducted with landowners individually.
	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Project Feasibility** phase?	N/A	Yes. The energy company, however, suffered the most backlash during this phase due to a loss of community trust during the previous project phases.
	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Planning and Approval** phase?	N/A	N/A
	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Construction** phase?	Between March 2018 and December 2020, the community received frequent updates about the project's construction, roughly twice a month.	N/A
	Are engagement sessions scheduled prior to, during, and after the **Commissioning** phase?	Website newsletters are the main source of updates.	N/A
	Are there engagement sessions before, during and after the **Decommission** phase?	N/A	N/A