

How County Commissioners' View Local Renewable Energy Development

Online Survey

SUMMARY

GoodPower conducted a survey of 66 county commissioners in the United States about their perceptions of renewable energy development including what resources would best support them in supporting development in their community. The survey found that there was mixed support for renewable energy development with slightly more support for solar than wind. Commissioners reported wanting to hear more examples from other local governments and receiving technical expertise that can help them understand the impact on their communities. They were also interested in funds to help with public engagement.

BACKGROUND

County commissioners are key local decision-makers for supporting the development of renewable energy in their local communities. The goal of this investigation was to learn more about this key, understudied audience, in an effort to build more support for this group. We asked commissioners about their perceptions of renewable energy in their community and what resources, information, and messaging can be leveraged to facilitate and build more support for siting and permitting.

DATA AND METHODS

A sample of 66 county commissioners completed an online survey in October 2024. The survey took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The average age of the respondents was 62 years old, with most commissioners over the age of 55 ($n = 36$, 54%) and self-identifying as white ($n = 49$, 74%) and male ($n = 43$, 65%). The sample is highly educated, with over half holding at least a Bachelor's degree. Though about one-third did not report a political identification, of those who did, the largest share self-identified as Republican ($n = 24$, 42%). The commissioners serve or have previously served in sixteen different states.

FINDINGS

COMMISSIONERS' PERCEPTIONS OF RENEWABLE ENERGY SITING AND PERMITTING

A little less than half of the county commissioners (42%, $n = 28$) report there have been approved renewable energy projects in their county, while only 20% ($n = 13$) report there

have been projects denied or blocked. However, 12% (n = 8) report that moratorium or ordinances limiting renewable energy development have also been passed.

Commissioners' perceptions of utility scale renewable energy are mixed, with slightly more support for solar than wind. A little over a third of commissioners report supporting the development of utility scale solar (36%, n = 24) and a little over a quarter report supporting utility scale wind development (27%, n = 18). Similar numbers oppose these developments: 26% (n = 17) report opposing solar developments and 32% (n = 21) report opposing wind development. Most were neutral or had no opinion on offshore wind.

There are some indications that this may differ slightly by political party affiliation. Keeping in mind only about two-thirds of the sample self-reported a political affiliation and a little over half self-identified as Republican, there appears to be more support and less opposition for solar among Democrats and Independents. Democrats also appear more supportive and less resistant to wind energy developments as well. Republicans, in contrast, had more opposition and less support for both types of development.

A little less than half perceived renewable energy development was happening too quickly (42%, n = 28). The commissioners identified lower energy prices (49%; n = 32), reducing air and water pollution (39%, n = 26), and new tax revenues that fund community services such as public schools (n = 38%, n = 25) are very important as production of renewable energy increases.

Clean energy production in America is expanding...	<i>N</i> (%)
Too slowly	15 (22.7%)
The right pace	16 (24.2%)
Too quickly	28 (42.4%)
No response	7 (10.6%)

As the U.S. continues to increase the production of clean energy, how important are each of the following:	<i>Very</i>	<i>Moderately</i>	<i>Slightly</i>	<i>Not</i>	<i>No answer</i>
New tax revenues that fund community services such as public schools	25 (37.9%)	20 (30.3%)	15 (22.7%)	5 (7.6%)	1 (1.5%)
The creation of new, good-paying jobs in clean energy	19 (28.8%)	22 (33.3%)	17 (25.8%)	7 (10.6%)	1 (1.5%)
Reducing air and water pollution	26 (39.4%)	19 (28.8%)	10 (15.2%)	11 (16.7%)	0 (0%)
Lower energy prices	32 (48.5%)	18 (27.3%)	9 (13.6%)	6 (9.1%)	1 (1.5%)

CONSTITUTUENT SUPPORT AND CONCERNS ABOUT RENEWABLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENT

Commissioners identified public opposition (42%, n = 28), lack of interest or demand (36%, n = 24), and cost/lack of funds (24%, n = 16) as top constraints to building utility scale renewable energy in their counties. Although a little over 20% indicated there were no major constraints or limitations.

Commissioners generally perceived they had sufficient access to legal counsel (51%, n = 34) and expertise (44%, n = 29) to review siting and permitting plans, but also that lacked sufficient information about the projects (41%, n = 27). The vast majority were not currently pursuing state or federal funding for local energy projects (70%, n = 46).

The commissioners also perceived mixed support among constituents, with a little more perceiving opposition. The majority of commissioners reported that they also perceived discussions amongst elected officials and between constituents to be mixed.

	<i>Strongly / Somewhat agree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Strongly / Somewhat disagree</i>
My constituents support the development of clean energy projects.	17 (25.8%)	24 (36.4%)	22 (33.3%)

POTENTIAL RESOURCES AND MESSENGERS

In terms of resources for planning and developing renewable energy in their communities, the majority of commissioners reported having access to technical experts on the local impacts (such as on wildlife, property values, sound levels, etc.) would be most helpful (58%,

n = 38) as well as additional funds or grants for public engagement and planning/legal consultants (52%, n = 34).

To engage community members, commissioners listed funds or grants for community engagement efforts (52%, n = 34), success stories from other counties (52% = n = 34), and FAQ sheets as the most helpful (42%, n = 28).

The majority of respondents listed other local governments that have developed renewable energy projects as the most trusted source (59%, n = 39). They also identified individuals living near existing renewable energy projects (47%, n = 31), electric utilities for the jurisdiction (44%, n = 29), and state departments for natural resources or the environment (42%, n = 28). They were notably less interested in messengers such as nonprofits, private energy companies and contractors, and federal agencies like the U.S. Department of Energy.

This sample of commissioners were also very politically engaged, with 61% (n = 40) reporting they follow politics and current events “all or most of the time” and specifically local news “very closely” (65%, n = 43; compared to 42% or n = 28 for national news). The majority of the commissioners received their news via online news websites (70%) and traditional media TV, newspapers and radio (50-60%) while considerably less on social media (38%, n = 25). A little over two-thirds reported having a Facebook (68%, n = 45) but less than a quarter reported other social media platform use (Instagram, X, or TikTok) and another quarter (26%, n = 17) noting they do not use social media at all.

CONCLUSION: TAKEAWAYS AND NEXT STEPS

There are still mixed feelings towards solar and wind energy developments among county commissioners and some information gaps that can be filled with education campaigns.

There was not overwhelming support or opposition to renewable energy projects even when looking across political affiliations – most commissioners reported being neutral on the issue. It appeared that hearing more about economic benefits (such as lower costs and increased revenue) and reducing environmental impacts may be helpful. There were some differences between those of different political party identification, with Democrats having more support for renewable energy and Republicans having more opposition. It should be noted that only two-thirds reported a political identification and most self-identified as Republican, so these differences should be interpreted with caution.

County commissioners perceive at least some resistance to renewable energy development from constituents.

Many commissioners reported opposition or simply lack of interest among constituents as constraints, with respondents reporting a mix of constructive and divisive conversations with constituents. At the same time, a majority were not pursuing state or federal funding for projects and acknowledged that having access to funds for community engagement efforts would be helpful.

Local messengers and examples are the most trusted resources.

The commissioners reported that success stories or information from other local governments to be the most desired. They also noted having expert advice to examine the impact on their communities would be most helpful. However, they are less interested in mediated communities (online groups or helplines) and appear to be less likely to use social media platforms. Though most of the sample reported having a Facebook account, there was little social media use overall. Most of the commissioners were highly engaged news consumers, especially local news. It may be helpful to leverage local traditional media outlets, such as newspaper, television, and radio, to reach these audiences.