Electrifying Community Outreach

A 2023-2024 resident clean energy engagement campaign in Acton, Framingham, Natick and Wayland

Funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

FINAL REPORT

July 2024

Table of Contents

Overview of Key Accomplishments 3

Electrifying Community Outreach Program Development 3
- Background 3
- Coalition Building 4
- Website & Branding 4
- Residential Survey To Assess Consumer Knowledge and Obstacles 5
- Procurement Services 6

plugIN Campaign Implementation 7
- Development of Marketing Materials 8
- Outreach and Engagement Activities 9
  - Table 1: Potential Reach of plugIN Campaign Outreach Activities 10

plugIN Campaign Results 11
- Effectiveness of Marketing Tools 11
- Results from Outreach and Engagement Activities 12
  - Table 2: plugIN Events, Registration and Attendance by Clean Energy Technology 12
- Website Usage 14
- Resident Clean Energy Coaching 15
- Community Solar Subscriptions 17
  - Table 3: Community Solar Subscribers 18
- Municipal Sustainability Staff and Volunteer Qualitative Experiences 18

Lessons for Future Campaigns 18

Overview of Key Accomplishments

The Electrifying Community Outreach Program was an innovative community collaboration and outreach campaign in Acton, Framingham, Natick and Wayland in the spring of 2024. The goal of the program was to facilitate an outreach to drive the adoption of residential actions to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions in four communities.

Key accomplishments include:

- Establishing the plugIN campaign as a growing movement to engage residents in clean energy actions through community outreach.
- Building community capacity to deliver engagement activities by providing common services and materials from organizing collaborative events to providing template social media posts.
- Helping communities to learn and grow their own skills, in particular tracking and assessing the success of their own outreach efforts.
- Hosting 23 events with nearly 400 registrants. 67% reported learning a lot, 17% were ready to take the next step in adopting the technology, and 88% would recommend a similar event to a friend.
- Supporting 87 coaching requests.
- Disseminating over 73 social media posts.
- Hosting a plugIN campaign website with over 800 unique visitors.
- Introducing community solar to residents and facilitating the enrollment of 23 new subscribers. New subscribers include six low income residents that will result in 20 percent savings with annual electricity costs.
- Learning about benefits and barriers to heat pumps, home solar and community solar through a survey that reached 403 respondents.
- Five additional nearby communities are interested in joining the effort.

Electrifying Community Outreach Program Development

Background

MassEnergize works with community organizers and local leaders to scale household and community-level climate actions. We believe that household-level climate action, propelled at scale, is critical for reaching our climate goals and we know that activating community networks is a powerful tool to drive change.

The goal of the Electrifying Community Outreach (ECO) program was to facilitate an outreach campaign in four communities to drive the adoption of residential actions to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. State funding enabled this project to be deployed from October 2023 through June 2024. With the tools, resources, and learnings from the ECO project, MassEnergize now is ready to scale this community outreach model and offer it to all communities across the Commonwealth.

Coalition Building

Four communities in the MetroWest region of Boston were invited to participate in ECO: Acton, Framingham, Natick and Wayland. These communities were selected due to a pre-existing good relationship with MassEnergize, their historic community efforts at residential clean energy engagement, and their geographic proximity. Key partners from each community included a municipal sustainability staff person and volunteers from a community-based organization.

Community members completed a pre-campaign capacity assessment and created community asset inventories to organize their partners and communication channels. MassEnergize provided staff support and hired a consultant for project coordination and a marketing consultant to design outreach materials.

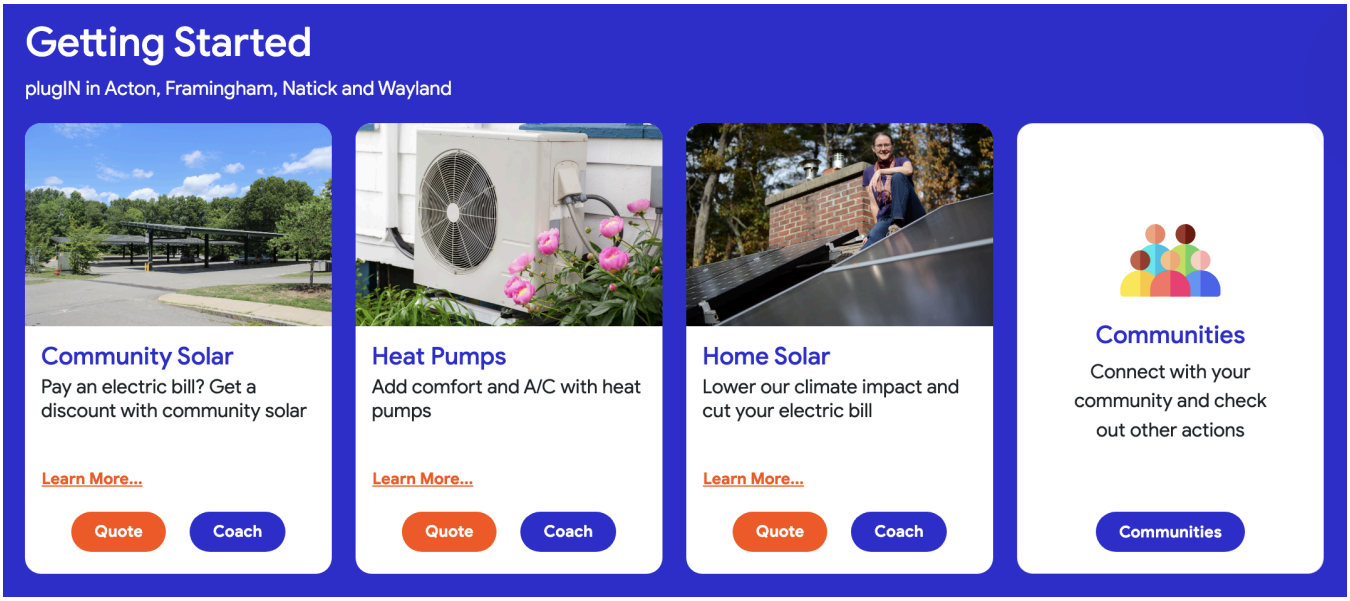
A kick-off meeting in November gathered all ECO members together to discuss a common focus on residential heat pumps, home solar and community solar. While heat pumps and home solar are available only to homeowners, community solar is a subscription to clean electricity and is available to anyone paying an electricity bill, including renters and condo owners. Including community solar allowed the campaign to offer an action to all residents while also including the high-impact measures of installing heat pumps and home solar.

Website & Branding

Communities worked with the marketing consultant to come to a consensus on a logo and brand for the ECO campaign called plugIN, playing on the idea of plugging into a cleaner energy future. A map illustrating the four communities (shown on the cover page) was created and used as the main graphic for the campaign.

MassEnergize created a new, multi-community campaign website for the ECO program. An off-the-shelf commercial product was used from December through mid-March to build a prototype website and preview content with ECO members. A custom-built website and database were created for the ECO program and launched in mid-March at plugINMetroWest.org. The tool used to build the website was

built to enable other communities to be able to customize content for their own use in the future. A sample screenshot from this website is below.



Residential Survey To Assess Consumer Knowledge and Obstacles

MassEnergize created an online survey for residents in the four ECO communities in order to better understand existing awareness and opinions on the benefits and barriers of heat pumps, home solar, and community solar. Deploying the survey early in the program also allowed the communities to test their outreach and communication channels and experiment with social media before the launch of the campaign. The survey was titled, “Creating Healthier Communities Together” in an effort to appeal to a broader audience than only those people identifying as environmentalists as may have occurred if the word “climate” was used in the survey title. The survey received 403 responses from 18 different communities with 95% of the responses coming from the four ECO communities of Acton, Framingham, Natick, and Wayland. We partnered with Gregg Sparkman, a professor at Boston College and an Advisor to the MassEnergize Board, to analyze the results. Tabea Hoffman, who works with Gregg Sparkman, provided the analysis.

Key takeaways from the survey include:

- There is significant interest from communities and organizations in learning about this survey’s findings.
- The majority of respondents were climate focused with greater than 75% saying reducing pollutants is a very important benefit.

- Many respondents already had one or more clean energy technologies: 37% have heat pumps and 39% have home solar. Community solar is the exception: only 10% subscribe to community solar.
- Heat pumps
    - Overall, reducing fossil fuels (80%) was the most cited benefit, followed by providing air conditioning (66%). Cost (50%) was the most cited barrier.
    - Having air conditioning (85%) was a major driver towards getting a heat pump for those already having installed a heat pump.
    - For those wanting to know more about heat pumps, these factors were rated as very important: cost savings vs oil (79%), increased comfort (76%), and financial incentives (73%).
    - Cost (34%) and reliability/appearance (38%) are the largest concerns of respondents that will look into heat pumps when their heating or cooling equipment gets old.
- Home solar
    - Overall, reducing fossil fuels (83%) was the most cited benefit and cost (54%) was the most cited barrier.
    - Saving money (40%) and reducing fossil fuels (42%) were the main drivers for respondents already having a solar installation.
    - Confusion around installing solar (28%) and finding an installer (25%) are slightly a larger barrier than cost (22%) and impacts on roof (21%) for respondents interested in home solar.
- Community solar
    - It is a relatively unknown clean energy option with 28% of respondents stating they don't know how it works or never heard of it.
    - There may be significant public interest in community solar with 45% stating they want to know more.
    - Overall, reducing fossil fuels (77%) was the most cited benefit, and understanding the technology (32%) and finding a provider (32%) were the most cited barriers.

Procurement Services

Residents are often concerned about which clean energy companies are trustworthy. Municipalities are not able to recommend specific companies to inquiring residents unless they have conducted a competitive procurement process.

The installation of heat pumps and home solar has been ongoing for 5-10 years in Massachusetts communities. Community members consult with their friends and neighbors to identify installers with

whom they have had a good experience. Community solar, in contrast, is a relatively new state-enabled program and residents do not have much experience with this marketplace.

For these reasons, MassEnergize, in collaboration with the municipal sustainability staff, developed a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) to select one or more community solar providers to be partners for the ECO campaign. Five community solar providers responded to the RFP and two were selected: Nexamp and Sunwealth. Sunwealth was selected to offer subscriptions for low income households and Nexamp was selected to offer subscriptions for market-rate households. The criteria for selection included capacity in existing community solar projects, quality of customer service, community outreach and engagement experience, applicant quality and competency, and discount offered to subscribers.

plugIN Campaign Implementation

The ECO cohort developed and implemented the plugIN outreach campaign from January through June of 2024. Outreach and marketing is continuing in a more limited capacity beyond the June conclusion of the campaign but the resources developed remain available to the communities.

Senator Jamie Eldridge, along with Representatives Carmine Gentile (Wayland) and David Linsky (Natick), Wayland Town Manager Michael McCall, and municipal sustainability staff members Abigail Shute (Wayland), Shawn Luz (Framingham), and Jillian Wilson-Martin (Natick) met on February 16th to celebrate the launch of the plugIN campaign. Attendees also included MassEnergize Executive Director Nathan Scott, MassEnergize co-founder Ellen Tohn (and Energize Wayland volunteer), and representatives from community organizations: Karen Root Watkins and KJ Herther of Energize Acton, Aimee Powelka and Larry Stoodt of Energize Framingham and

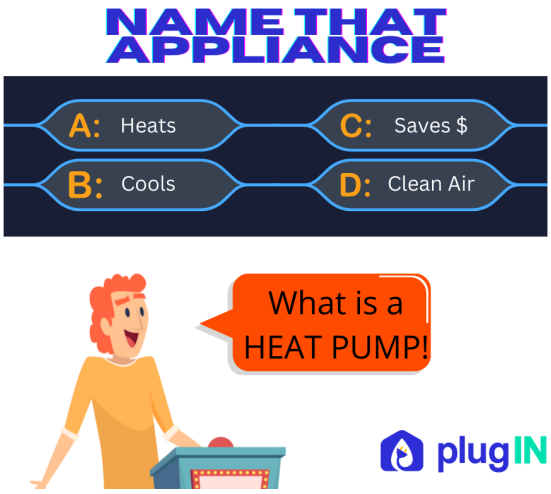
Framingham's Sustainability Committee, and Anne Harris of Energize Wayland and Co-Chair of Wayland's Energy and Climate Committee.

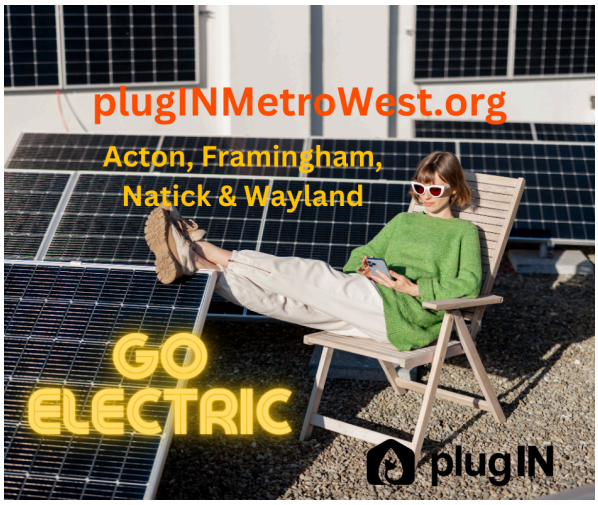
Development of Marketing Materials

The marketing effort began with the creation of a logo and theme for the campaign and outreach efforts. Consistent logo and branding use was outlined in a style guide. A graphic of the Metrowest area including the four participating towns was also created for banners, flyers, and social media.

Posting on social media was new to several participants supporting the campaign. To prepare communities for planned outreach efforts, recorded trainings were developed to provide a step-by-step overview of how to post and monitor on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and NextDoor. A separate instructional flier was developed to explain how to edit social media posts in Canva, offering the flexibility to modify text, cobrand, and include event dates.

Social media posts (samples below) were developed for the months of January, February, March, and May, providing 17 individual posting options with formats of each available for each of the six social media platforms. Posts included designed and properly sized images as well as text to accompany the image posting. ECO campaign participants were given flexibility to alter posts as they saw fit. Bitly links were created for each post to accurately measure engagement.





For the months of January, February, and March, newsletter and e-blast text and images were also provided (e-blasts are emails out to a user base). As with the social media posts, ECO campaign participants had flexibility to customize this content to fit well with their audiences. Distinct Bitly links were created for each town and MassEnergize.

A suggested dissemination schedule was shared with ECO campaign participants and communities. Each community set their dissemination cadence and schedule. MassEnergize did not dictate the schedule. While newsletters appeared to have a pre-campaign schedule, thereby providing regular and consistent visibility of campaign activities, social media outreach and e-blasts were less predictable and not used as regularly. A monthly dissemination tracker was developed where participants were asked to fill in key data points, noting where and when they posted to social media, when they included content in their newsletter, how they disseminated information through other channels, and the number of events convened. The tracker may have been overwhelming or too time-consuming to some participants as most months did not contain full information.

An event flier was designed for use by the four communities for webinars, home tours, and educational events. As with other marketing materials, the flier could be altered, co-branded, and customized, as needed.

Throughout the campaign, there was an effort to collect written and video testimonials on each of the three home electrification technologies. A tutorial flier was created to ensure a consistent approach for video testimonials that would work for social media and YouTube. While individual testimonials could have been recorded and delivered for editing, the majority were obtained at a press event and conference. Raw video footage was edited and branded to the campaign as long-format videos, shorter :30 second videos, and compilation videos for each of the technologies.

In addition to receiving monthly feedback from the ECO campaign participants, the marketing consultant held a focus group discussion with a diverse representation of residents from three communities. A focus group discussion guide was developed to facilitate the 30-minute discussion that took place on February 24, 2024. At the time of the focus group, none of the participants had heard of the plugIN campaign. Some of the key takeaways included: messaging focus on clean air and cost savings, connecting home electrification as a climate change solution, focusing on benefits of change, and including the map made it obvious that this was a community effort.

In January, our campaign team explored Google Ads, as nonprofits are offered up to $10,000 of ad space. Despite organizing the campaign and targeting the four communities participating in the plugIN campaign, our outreach was repeatedly paused due to technical barriers. For that reason, we were not able to tap into this resource.

Outreach and Engagement Activities

Outreach and engagement activities consisted primarily of the following activities:

- Hosting an in-person event on heat pumps, home solar and/or community solar
- Hosting a virtual webinars on heat pumps, home solar and/or community solar
- Attending a public community event and providing information on the plugIN campaign and on heat pumps, home solar and community solar
- Hanging a banner with the plugIN logo on a busy street for residents to see
- Sending a physical piece of mail to community residents
- Highlighting or mentioning the plugIN campaign in newsletters or announcements
- Posting on the plugIN campaign, heat pumps, home solar and/or community solar and associated events on a social media channel

Table 1 provides an overview of outreach activities. These results are reported according to information received by MassEnergize from communities. Due to limited capacity, in particular by volunteers, many activities have not been reported or included.

Table 1: Potential Reach of plugIN Campaign Outreach Activities

Outreach activity by all communities and MassEnergize	**Total number of activities**	**Potential residents reached**
plugIN banners posted in a community	11 weeks in Acton, Framingham, Natick and Wayland	> 130,000
Physical mailer to residents	plugIN included in census mailers in Framingham, Natick and Wayland Community solar mailing to environmental justice neighborhoods in Natick	> 107,000 1,200
Social media posts	>70 social media posts on Facebook, NextDoor, Twitter/X and Instagram	>12,000
Included in a community group newsletter	9 in Acton, Framingham, Natick and Wayland	6,500

Included in municipal newsletter	7 in Framingham and Natick	Unavailable

plugIN Campaign Results

Effectiveness of Marketing Tools

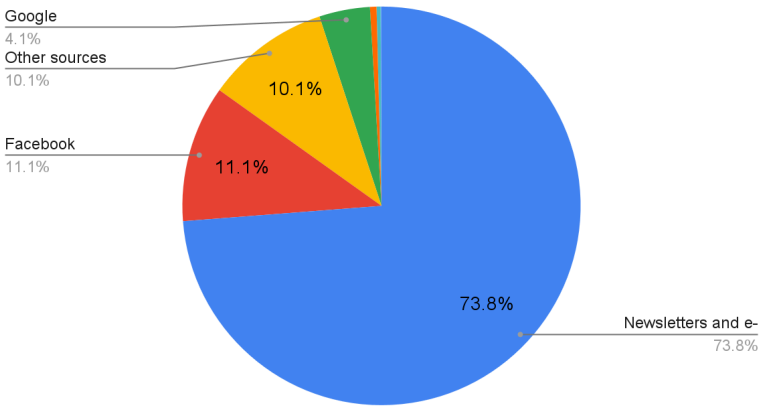
In Framingham, Natick and Wayland residents reported seeing the plugIN banner. In one instance, it led to a new volunteer for the community group.

While a suite of campaign materials were available for use by the ECO campaign participants, there was no requirement to use them in outreach and awareness raising. Participants were encouraged on a regular basis to use developed and designed materials. Following are some key metrics:

Campaign Summary Metrics

In order to determine where our website visitors heard about the plugIN campaign, we used bitly links as described above. These allow us to examine not just how many visitors came to the website but also where they came from.

Fig. 1: Marketing Outreach Performance by Channel



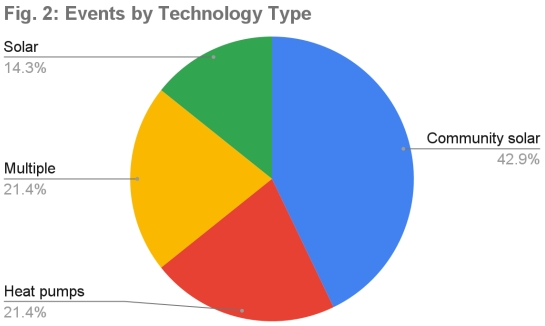
Following are some highlights from outreach performance:

- Most engagement occurred from newsletters and e-blasts (73%).
- Facebook was the highest performing social media platform(11%). Twitter/X and Instagram had the least amount of activity.
- Peaks in activity aligned with specific dates, indicating events or promotions driving these spikes.
- Top performers included:
    - Energize Acton e-blasts
    - Natick municipal newsletters

- Energize Framingham newsletters and social media
- Energize Wayland newsletter, e-blasts and social media

Results from Outreach and Engagement Activities

plugIN communities hosted or attended a total of 33 events (Table 2). Of these, 23 were webinars or in-person events at which the communities could track registration and attendance (Table 2). Registration indicates interest in learning more about the clean energy topic and is more indicative of the success of outreach and event publicity activities. Many registrants that were not able to attend reported watching the recording and reached out to request coaching services.



Community solar was featured more often as a topic at these community events (in-person and virtual webinars), likely due to the relative unfamiliarity of this clean energy technology.

In Wayland, a resident of the Housing Authority shared her very positive experience with community solar at a meeting on resiliency hosted by the Wayland Council on Aging.

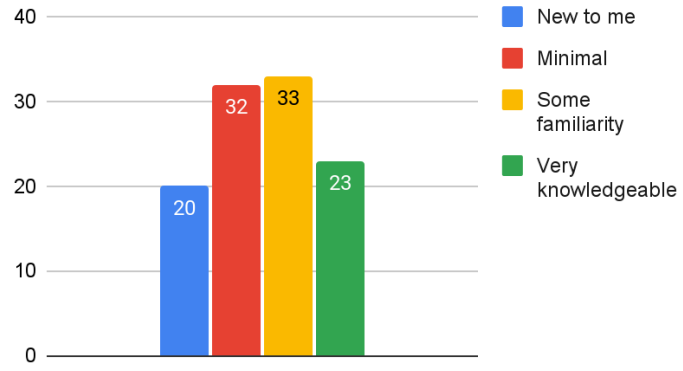
Table 2: plugIN Events, Registration and Attendance by Clean Energy Technology

plugIN Events	Number of Events	Number of Registrants	Number of Attendees
Community solar	8	89	50
Heat pumps	12	196	163
Home solar	7	99	75
General community event	10	NA - registration not required	NA - difficult to track
Totals	33*	384	288

*Note: Some events covered more than one technology so the sum of events does not equal the total number of events.

Community goals for hosting events include raising awareness of and interest in community solar, heat pumps and home solar as well as providing information to assist residents to take these actions. To better understand the impact of these events, MassE created an evaluation tool used to the extent possible at all webinars. We were interested in learning if the webinars were reaching residents who were not familiar with the topic/technology – were we getting beyond the "choir" of early adopters. Our communities also wanted to better understand if the content provided enhanced attendee knowledge and most importantly if they felt more comfortable taking the next step in their clean energy journey.

Fig. 3: Rate your prior knowledge on this topic



The results documented that the events filled a need from the community to learn more about clean energy because nearly half of the attendees (48%) had very little familiarity with the clean energy topic (Figure 3).

The events also increased attendee knowledge with 67% indicating they learned quite a bit or a "ton"; 27% learned a bit. (Figure 4). The majority of attendees left feeling confident to take the next step to sign up for community solar or to install heat pumps or home solar; 17% indicated they were ready to take that next step (Figure 5). Finally, the events were generally well-regarded with nearly all attendees (88%) agreeing that they would recommend a friend go to a similar future event (Figure 6).

Fig. 4: Did you learn something new today?

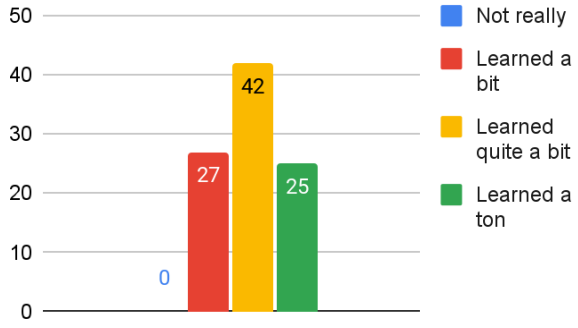


Fig. 5: Do you feel more confidant to take the next step in your own clean energy projectDo

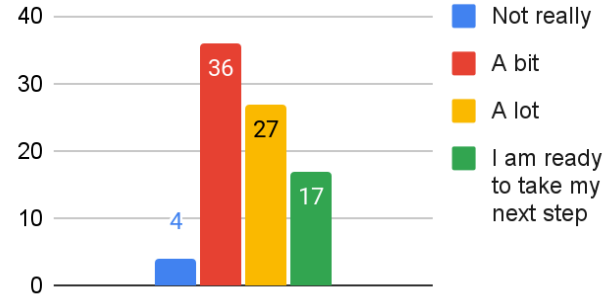
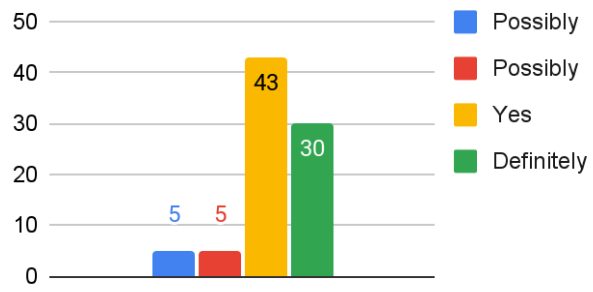


Fig. 6: Would you recommend a friend go to an event like this?



Website Usage

Visitors to the plugINmetrowest.org website primarily came directly from a link they found in a newsletter or email but also from social media (Figure 7). More than 800 unique people visited the plugINmetrowest.org website.

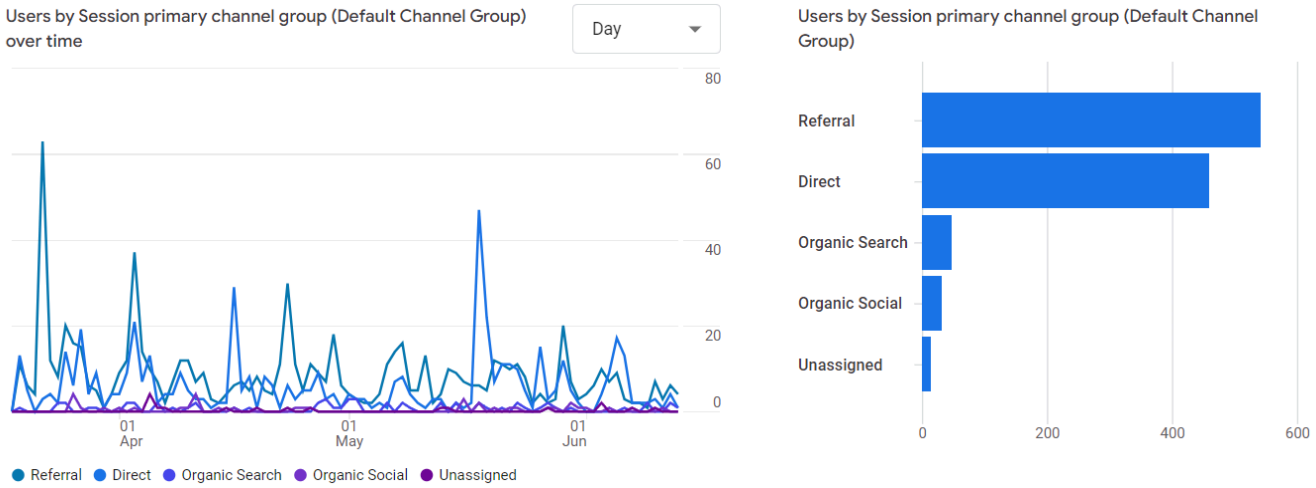


Figure 7: plugINmetrowest.org website traffic and referral channel (March 18 - June 13, 2024)

Taking a closer look at user activity on the plugINmetrowest.org website, we see that the majority of views naturally start at the home page (“ME Campaign” in Fig. 8), which was the referral link from all social media posts, newsletters, and e-blasts. It is interesting to note that organic searches also drove significant traffic to the website, with some of the longest engagement sessions (49 seconds). What is interesting is that the community solar page is more than twice as popular as the home solar page, the next most popular page. You can also observe the interest in community solar as the most popular events pages with two events having a total of 120 views (Figure 8, bottom two rows).

Views by Page title and screen class

PAGE TITLE AND SCREEN CLASS	VIEWS
ME Campaign	2.2K
Community Solar	389
Home Solar	176
Acton, Framingham, Natick, Wayland	127
Heat Pumps	127
Event | Save $ with Community Sola...	92
Event | 05/21 Save $ with Communit...	28

Fig. 8: Most popular plugINmetrowest.org site pages (March 18 - June 13, 2024)

Looking more closely at what users were interested in finding on the plugIN website, we see that the most common reason visitors came is to learn more:

- 62% of total clicks to learn more
    - 35% about community solar
    - 23% about heat pumps
    - 19% about home solar

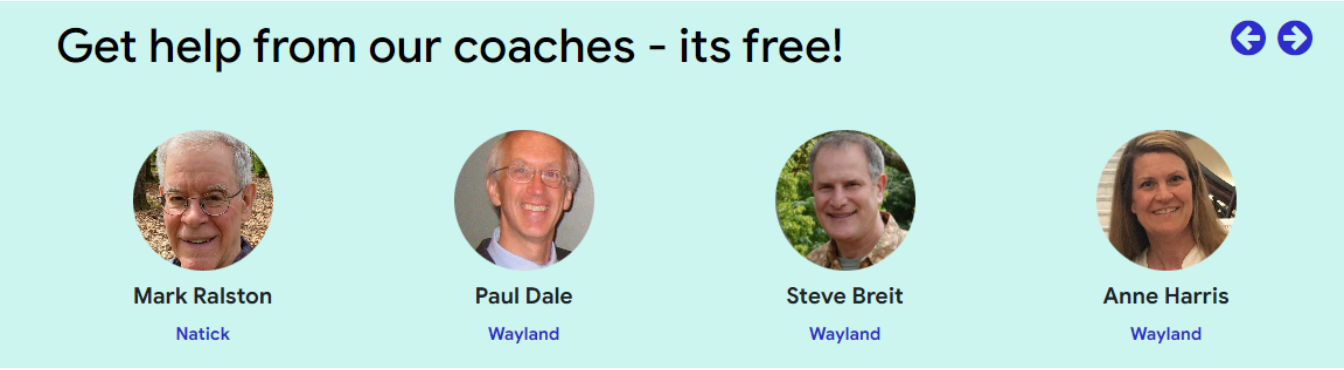
Once visitors moved to the community solar, heat pumps or home solar technology pages, they were very interested in vendors and incentives with:

- 44% vendor-directed clicks from technology pages
- 35% incentive-directed clicks from technology pages
- 21% get help-directed clicks from technology pages

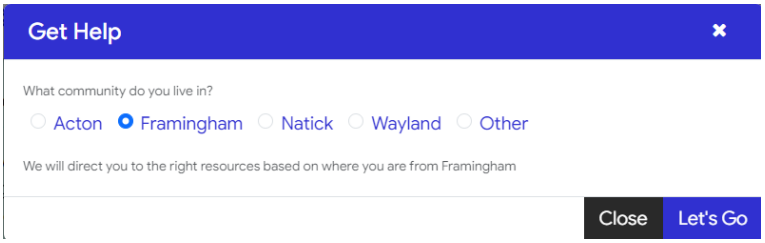
Resident Clean Energy Coaching

Residents need support beyond education and information. They need to have specific questions answered or assistance from a trusted source in comparing quotes from different vendors.

The plugIN campaign prominently featured volunteer coaches from Acton, Natick and Wayland on the website with their photos in order to build trust and confidence.



Coaching requests came in primarily through several channels: through the plugINmetrowest.org website, directly to the Acton Energy Coach page, and via email. On the website, when a visitor requested “Get Help” they completed a pop-up box asking where they live in order to connect them



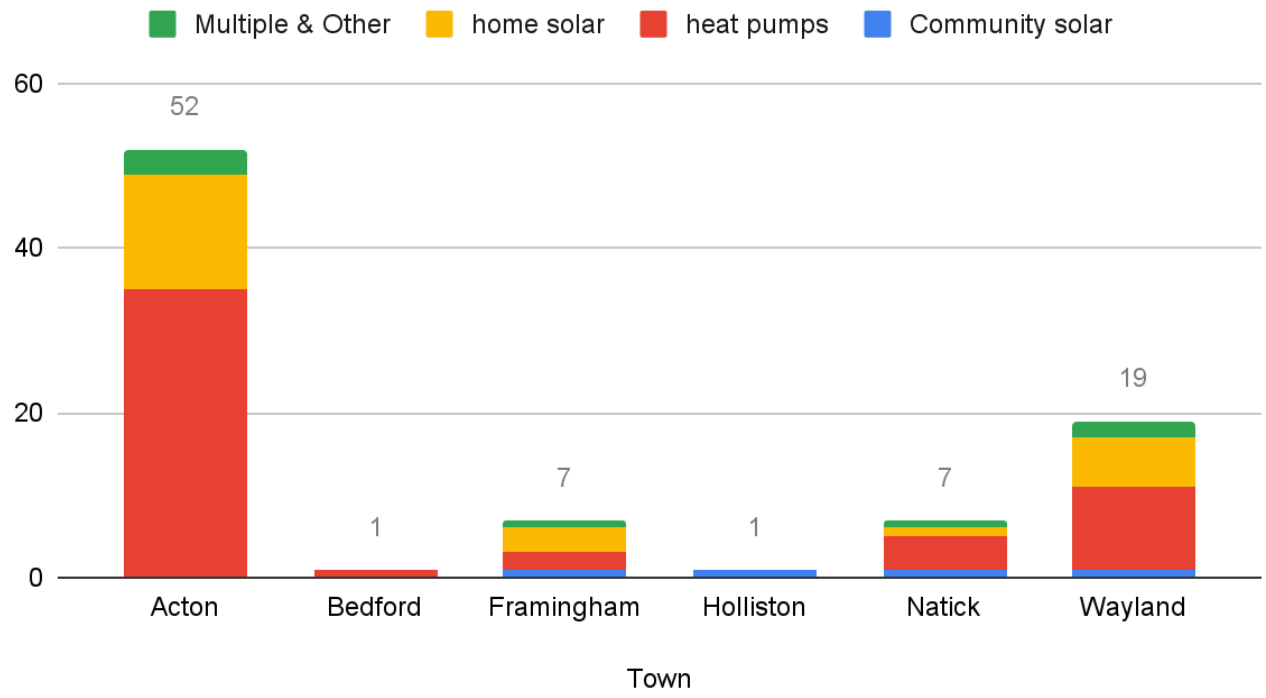
with coaches in their own community.

A total of 87 coaching requests were received during the plugIN campaign timeframe with the number of coaching requests proportional to the community's preceding efforts in residential engagement. Acton, for example, heavily promoted coaching for heat pumps in 2023 and provided funding for a vendor's coaching program. Acton's coaching requests were more than half of the total coaching requests across the four communities, indicating the prolonged timeline of awareness programs on future residential steps towards installing clean energy technology such as heat pumps.

A Natick resident requested coaching for heat pumps on the plugIN website. She reported back that she is happy with their installed partial home system.

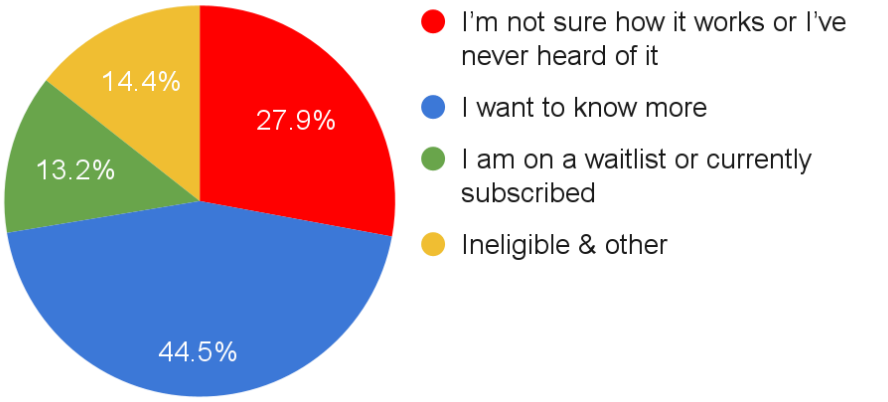
Wayland also has a history of resident engagement and coaching prior to the plugIN campaign and saw an increase in the number of coaching requests compared to preceding months. In contrast, Framingham had far fewer coaching requests despite its significantly larger population in part due to more limited previous resident engagement programs in the community.

Fig. 9: Clean Energy Coaching Requests by Community and Technology



Community Solar Subscriptions

Fig. 10: Which of the following statements about community solar best applies to you?



Community solar is a relatively new clean energy offering and the public is largely unaware of its offering and benefits. As we saw in our survey, a vast majority (72.4%) of residents have not heard of it, are not sure how it works, or need more information (Figure 10). The plugIN campaign conducted outreach to help provide awareness and education about community solar at eight specific events that had a total of 50 attendees.

During this initial outreach, we saw a small increase in the number of community solar subscribers from the plugIN communities (Table 4) with a total of 23 new subscribers. Six of these new subscribers have enrolled in the low income programs that will save the residents up to 20% of their annual electricity costs helping to alleviate their energy burden (the higher proportion of their incomes spent on electricity bills relative to non low income residents). Interestingly, three of the new subscribers were from Lexington, a "spillover" effect that we can attribute to a housing authority manager in Acton also offering a community solar sign-up event to housing authority residents in Lexington.

A Natick resident had been wanting to do solar for years but had shade. She attended a community solar webinar and requested help on the plugIN website. With our help, she was so excited to be able to sign up and finally go solar.

Table 3: Community Solar Subscribers

Community	Subscribers before plugIN started	New subscribers attributable to plugIN	Total current subscribers
Acton	7	1	8
Framingham	16	7	23
Natick	11	4	15
Wayland	8	8	16
Lexington		3	3
TOTAL	***42***	***23***	***65***

Municipal Sustainability Staff and Volunteer Qualitative Experiences

Two primary activities were used to assess the effectiveness of the plugIN campaign in its efforts to support municipal sustainability staff and community volunteers. The first was a short capacity survey conducted prior to the start of the plugIN campaign with a corresponding post-campaign survey. The survey indicated a moderate growth in the number or effectiveness of community partnerships. We also saw a shift in the perceived effectiveness of outreach efforts. At the start of plugIN, communities felt that webinars and in-person events were the most effective means of outreach. Upon completion of plugIN, communities felt that newsletters were the most effective means of outreach. The second was qualitative interviews with each of the municipal sustainability staff and community volunteers. The take-aways from those interviews are included below in our lessons for future campaigns.

Lessons for Future Campaigns

Both MassEnergize and our plugIN community partners learned tremendously from the plugIN effort. MassEnergize will apply these lessons to optimize future collaborations and community campaigns. We have listed our key lessons learned below under specific program components.

Collaboration and Capacity Building

- One of the most cited benefits of the ECO program was creating an ongoing means and purpose for intercommunity connections. Every community mentioned being inspired to take on new efforts by the experience of other community members. For example, the Town of Natick worked with their Rotary Club to sponsor a Father's Day bike ride. The Energize Wayland was in turn inspired to begin outreach with their own Rotary Club and local youth sports groups.
- Every community appreciated the added capacity provided by the plugIN program's core components of program management, campaign branding and a common website. Cited as most useful were the ability to centralize events, manage coaching requests, and produce banners and marketing materials.
- In some cases, there is tension between campaign goals and other community goals and efforts. For example, Energize Acton had a well developed heat pump outreach and support effort established in advance of the plugIN campaign. During the plugIN campaign, Acton was very appreciative of the community solar support but found it to be distracting to have two websites with information on heat pumps.
- To fully optimize future multi-community campaigns, a longer collaboration building process prior

to the launch of a campaign will increase the effectiveness of the group as a whole because all parties will feel more invested. This will help to mitigate the wide variations between communities in their goals and priorities as well as the unique relationships between municipal sustainability staff and volunteer groups in each community.

Website

- The campaign website, plugINmetrowest.org, was a valuable resource in providing clear and actionable information to residents. Having one site for residents to visit was critical to the success of the banners and marketing materials.
- More interactive aspects of the website such as the ability to like, share and comment were not widely used and might be more valuable with a more robust social media integration .
- The campaign website successfully integrated events and testimonials from existing individual MassEnergize community websites. However, in both instances, communities are finding that it is simply hard to get enough of people's time and attention to have them post their own experiences. In contrast, in-person collection of testimonials at the MassEnergize Community Climate Leaders Conference in April was quite successful. Future efforts to gather testimonials should consider in-person events as a fertile setting to gather video and written feedback that can be shared.

Marketing and Outreach

- For many communities, this was their first experience applying marketing practices to community outreach. For example, Acton was inspired to gain a better understanding of their outreach channels and Natick began using bitly links and QR codes to get a better sense of how many event attendees register from seeing a newsletter vs a physical mailer.
- The capacity of volunteers and municipal sustainability staff to track the impact of their outreach efforts is very limited. Time constraints very much limited the amount that communities could apply their new understanding of marketing practices.
- For future efforts, MassEnergize will apply marketing tools like using bitly links in a simplified fashion and will work to centralize data collection in order to minimize the time requests of volunteers and municipal sustainability staff.