

Says Annie Harper, Yale Community Carbon Fund coordinator, “I met really interesting people, have kept in touch with them—and have been introduced to other useful contacts.”

“It made me realize that there are a lot more players out there than I thought,” adds Connecticut Consumer Protection division director Frank Greene.

But to hold a megacommunity together, Rahl recommends identifying a coordinating organization. After the Energy Smart simulation, HDF launched a working group, and as of this writing, the state was considering assuming the coordinator role for a convening.

The simulation generated other recommendations, too:

- standardized marketing and outreach, with an emphasis on educating and selling consumers on easy-to-understand upgrades;
- easy financing, including adding retrofit loan payments to utility bills and linking repayment to a meter rather than a person;
- independent certification of contractors;
- training of a larger workforce;
- using a third-party administrator—possibly a utility—to bring an efficiency program to scale; and
- considering payment to energy suppliers for increasing efficiency.

Although there is no blueprint after a simulation, says Rahl, it is important to come out of a game with actionable items, even if that just means setting up meetings that wouldn't have happened otherwise. “You don't need to get all the way to an action plan,” he says. “The question is, Do you have forward momentum?”

Energy Smart Connecticut was an experiment for HDF. “We're learners in this space,” says Carty. “It was an advantage to be a learner because we had no preconceived notion about what the outcomes should be. ... You want people there who know something, are open-minded, and able to put aside their own agenda.”

Figuring out who should be represented can be hard. Although HDF and Booz Allen spent the bulk of the planning process on that aspect, participants identified gaps. Landlords were not present, for example, though their incentives and challenges differ from those of homeowners and renters. And there was discussion about how best to represent the low-income residents. Booz Allen had recommended against involving individuals who might not be able to see beyond their particular situation, but those who were called on to play the role of residents felt ill equipped to do so.

Annie Harper, a member of that team, said she “worked in development overseas for many years and was really shocked that there is not yet a recognition in this country that low-income people are in fact more expert than anyone else in dealing with the problems of poverty. Overall I found the set-up of the event fantastic, but the absence of this group of people made it ultimately much less valuable.” Possibly increased participation from community organizers, financial counselors, or neighborhood leaders might have bridged the gap.

Another challenge was that both the composition of the teams and the decision to base proposal development on the feedback of “residents” limited the range of solutions to energy-efficiency products. Other possible solutions—policy proposals such as removing the link between increased consumption and increased utility profits, and ideas about requiring Energy Star ratings for homes or energy audits that could be shared with potential buyers or renters—got less scrutiny than programs that were similar to existing programs.

Says Rahl, “We ended up with solutions that were more compromise oriented than they were innovation oriented”—an unusual outcome. But since the simulation was just a beginning point, innovation may still be in the offing.

The simulation led to an Energy Efficiency Workshop on July 24, 2012, with more than 50 state officials, academics, advocates, energy-solutions vendors, and utility representatives generating input on Connecticut's Energy Efficiency plans for 2012-2013. In August, HDF, with state agencies, convened a series of working groups that met weekly to draft official recommendations for the state's Conservation Load and Management Plan. “It's an ongoing dialogue,” says Carty.

The Potential

Rahl describes the sorts of challenges suited to the megacommunity format this way: “You never want to pick a goal that can simply be met by an analytical solution—figure out who needs to do what. You need a goal where, to meet it, there will be tensions between participants and no single way of getting there.”

Many topics in community development—abandoned properties, neighborhood change, education reform, foreclosure prevention—could benefit from a megacommunity simulation. If the field could develop skill with the approach and include all the important stakeholders, simulation could be a powerful tool for creating innovative solutions to some of our thorniest problems.

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Endnotes

¹ See <http://aceee.org/sector/state-policy/connecticut>.

² *Energy Smart Solutions: A Strategic Simulation* (briefing book prepared by i2 Community Consulting for Housing Development Fund and Booz Allen Hamilton, March 2012), <http://hdf-ct.org/PDFs/StrategicSimulationBriefingBook.pdf>.

³ *Energy Smart Solutions: A Megacommunity Strategic Simulation* (report prepared by Booz Allen Hamilton for Housing Development Fund, April 2012), <http://hdf-ct.org/PDFs/HDF-EnergySmartSolutionsSimulationFinalReport.pdf>.