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Town of Boone reaches climate neutrality in municipal operations eight years ahead of its goal

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The Town of Boone’s sustainability office oversees projects, programs and policies related to sustainability in the community.

File photo

BOONE — The town of Boone’s municipal operations will use 100% renewable energy by February, which is eight years ahead of the town’s goal.



The Boone Town Council voted during its Jan. 12 Town Council Meeting to allot \$60,290 to purchase renewable energy.

Boone is the first municipality in North Carolina to achieve 100% renewable energy in municipal buildings, according to a Jan. 12 Town of Boone press release.

Blue Ridge Energy and New River Light and Power are supplying the energy, 75% from BRE's solar arrays and 25% from NRLP's hydroelectric power through its Green Power Program. The divide, according to town sustainability manager George Santucci, is based on the energy consumption of the municipal buildings on each company's grids.

"Both companies have made the power available to us much sooner than I thought," Santucci said, and ultimately the quick adoption has put Boone far ahead of its goal to have municipal operations climate neutral by 2030.

In 2019, the town of Boone established a timeline for three sustainability goals, the first to reach climate neutrality, meaning net-zero greenhouse gas emission, in municipal operations by 2030, the second to transition municipal operations to 100% clean renewable energy by 2040 and the last to transition the entire town of Boone to 100% clean renewable energy by 2050.

"The opportunity is immediate. We felt strongly that we should lead the way and take advantage of this opportunity," Santucci said.

Investing in renewable energy not only means the town will have access to new renewable infrastructure, like Blue Ridge Energy's new Brighter Future Solar array, but Santucci said it also is signaling to the community's energy providers that there is a market for renewables and the companies should continue investing in that infrastructure.



According to Renee Whitener, Director of Public Relations for BRE, the newly built solar array, located in the Grace Chapel area of Caldwell County, will be up and running soon and is the biggest renewable energy project BRE has been involved in to date. The solar array will produce more than 19 million kilowatts of clean energy per year and a new rate Rider has been developed to allow local government members and institutions of higher education to receive the benefits of this green energy.

“By agreeing to purchase blocks of kWh from the solar array through the Rider in order to offset the consumption at their facilities with traditionally-generated energy, the Town of Boone and other participating members will be receiving the renewable energy credits directly from the array, helping them work to achieve their individual sustainability goals,” Whitener said.

BRE is selling the solar power to Boone in 100kWh blocks for \$1.90, which the town plans to buy 4,600 per month and NRLP is selling 250kWh blocks for \$5, which the town plans to buy 553 of the blocks per month.

Over \$60,000 sounds like a big investment, Santucci said — because it is. Municipal operations in Boone use a lot of energy, around 5 gigawatt hours of energy per year. In perspective, Santucci said the average house uses somewhere around 750 to 1,200 kilowatt hours of energy a month, whereas the Town of Boone’s municipal operations use five million kilowatt hours per month.

Boone’s municipal operations include facilities such as the town’s wastewater treatment plant and water intake system which use most of the electricity the town buys annually. Switching these to renewables is a big win, Santucci said, but he isn’t taking a vacation quite yet.

Many facets of municipal work in Boone still aren’t electric: cars still use fuel and a lot of heating in buildings is not electric, for example. Santucci said the next steps for his office are to improve electric vehicle charger availability in Boone and to 

electrify the town's fleet of vehicles over time.

“That’s going to be a long term process, that’s not something I can knock out in a year like we did moving municipal operations to renewables, unfortunately,” Santucci said.

This year, Santucci said the town is going to install 10 new electric vehicle chargers around town, some available to the public, some for municipal operations and some which will be shared. The 10 chargers will be able to service 15 cars, which is a large increase from the two electric vehicle chargers the town has now.

Santucci said another big project this year will be developing a Community Climate Action Plan to lay out next steps for how the community can become more sustainable. The emphasis here, Santucci said, is on long term progress.

Residents will be invited to public meetings and to give feedback and input on the plan, strategizing what kind of incentives people feel like they need to pursue goals like increasing electric vehicle adoption, making homes more energy efficient and other sustainable actions.

While energy and fossil fuel elimination is the biggest priority for the town, Santucci said, these other practices the community can participate in are an important piece of the puzzle to a sustainable community and will help the community imagine its future collaboratively.

Marisa Mecke is a Report for America corps member covering the environment for Mountain Times Publications. Report for America is a national nonprofit service program which places journalists in local newsrooms to report on under covered issues.

