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## Boone solar energy effort completes 39 projects

Solar field installation planned in 2016

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Crews install solar panels at High Country United Church of Christ as part of the Clean Energy for Boone effort in 2015.  
Photo submitted

BOONE — One year, 38 rooftop solar systems and one community solar shelter.

The Clean Energy for Boone effort spearheaded by locally based nonprofit Climate Voices US successfully installed 315 kilowatts of solar energy in the High Country area in 2015, resulting in hundreds of thousands of pounds of carbon dioxide being diverted from the atmosphere each year.

Climate Voices US was founded by Harvard Ayers, a retired Appalachian State University professor and environmental advocate, to reduce global climate change through advocacy, education and community action. The nonprofit launched the Clean Energy for Boone effort one year ago with a mission to install as many solar energy systems as possible before Dec. 31, 2015 — when North Carolina's 35 percent renewable energy tax credit expired.

Climate Voices partnered with Boone Collaborative Solar LLC and secured grants to offer discounted pricing, financing, free energy audits and subsidies to make it easy and affordable for families and others to go solar and invest in energy efficiency.

Other businesses involved included Spring Green Building & Design Group, reNew Home Inc., Sun Volt Electric Inc. and IcRus LLC.

Landon Pennington, founder and president of Collaborative Solar, said he has been friends with Ayers for a decade, and the two have worked together on environmental projects in the Arctic.

Together with their friend Dave Harman – who has a background as a CPA and helped start High Country Bank – “we came together to do something locally and tangible,” Pennington said. “We wanted to take our efforts that we have invested outside of Boone to do it right here.”

The project kicked off with interest meetings in early 2015. About 150 people expressed initial interest in participating, and the Clean Energy for Boone team conducted between 80 and 90 site assessments.

The ensuing process included meetings with property owners, data collection, proposals, contracts, coordinating with planning and inspections departments and five different utility companies, energy audits, solar PV installation and other improvements.

Solar panels were installed on 38 roofs across the Watauga County area, including downtown Boone, Sugar Mountain, Sampson, Beaver Dam, Todd, Vilas, Mountain City (Tenn.) and Valle Crucis.

Clients included homeowners, a church and a farm, with an average installation of 6kW – enough to offset about half of the energy a household uses, Pennington said. In North Carolina, energy produced by PV systems is sold back to the utility.

In addition, many of the project participants received energy audits and agreed to home improvements to improve energy efficiency – projects that have more impact on energy spending than the solar systems, said Pennington.



John Kidda of reNew Homes Inc. performed the energy audits and said that approximately 80 percent of homeowners with energy efficiency improvements he described as “low-hanging fruit” agreed to address their major problems.

The most common improvement needed in homes was insufficient attic insulation and excess draftiness between the home interior and the attic, he said.

“If you live in Boone, chances are you can cut your heating bills down dramatically by hiring somebody to seal up air leaks and reinsulate it,” said Kidda.

That includes homes built after the year 2000, he added.

“If you can make it easy for people to understand why it benefits them, people around here are ready to open their pocketbooks for it,” he said.

Clean Energy for Boone capped off 2015 with the installation of a community solar shelter at a town of Boone-owned parking lot on Depot Street in downtown Boone.

The solar array powers an electric vehicle charging station and was constructed with a combination of funding from the town, community members, grants and private investors.

Under a community investment model, private investors will make their money and earnings back in just a few years and then will donate the solar system to the town, Ayers said.

Pennington said Clean Energy for Boone is an exemplary partnership between for-profit and nonprofit entities.

“We wanted to have a nonprofit that wasn’t only sticking hands out waiting for foundations to fund them,” he said. “The great thing about these ‘Solarize’ campaigns is that they benefit all parties.”

It was a grassroots effort and learning experience, and not everything went smoothly, Pennington said

“We know we didn’t do things perfectly,” he said. “We know we did things good and we know we did things bad.”

The state tax credit for renewable energy projects is now expired, but Clean Energy for Boone’s work isn’t done.

In 2016, Pennington said, Collaborative Solar plans to continue working with local utilities to secure a contract for the installation of a solar field or garden. The project will offer an opportunity to invest in solar energy for community members, including residents with homes that are not suitable for rooftop solar installations.

For more information about Clean Energy for Boone, visit [www.climatevoicesus.org](http://www.climatevoicesus.org).

