

Release Date
June 5th, 2024

Summary Report on BCEP Cohort 2.0 Winter 2024



Cohort 2.0 participants learned about clean energy topics with Beyond Toxics during February, 2024.

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WHAT IS THE BETHEL CLEAN ENERGY PROJECT?

Introduction

A changing climate, aging home heating systems and appliances, and ongoing exposure to harmful industrial and wildfire air pollution is creating extreme stress for frontline communities and is putting their physical and mental health, resilience and financial stability at risk. An environmental justice neighborhood in West Eugene, Oregon, is facing a wide range of these threats as a result of historically poor land use planning and lack of infrastructure investments from the local government.

In early 2023, Beyond Toxics conceptualized a project to support a section of the Bethel neighborhood, a working class, low-income and diverse neighborhood in West Eugene. We formed a cohort of households and facilitated community conversations about what residents need to survive a changing climate and dangerous contamination from nearby industrial polluters.

After receiving a small project start-up grant from VertueLab, we launched The Bethel Clean Energy Project in March 2023 as a new demonstration project to achieve climate equity, improved health and no/low-cost access to clean energy systems.

The primary activities of the project were to engage an impacted community in decision making about how they want to create their own climate resilience and environmental health. Our objective was to help households develop an individualized work plan to install electric heating and cooling technologies, weatherization and air filtration systems to achieve highly desired environmental, health and climate benefits.

An overarching project goal was to help this community face these challenges by providing education and pathways to obtain efficient and sustainable energy technology. Investing in home improvement and energy upgrades elevates positivity in a neighborhood beset by increasing risks of extreme weather events and prolonged exposures to polluted air. A project output is this feasibility report, which describes how the Bethel Clean Energy Project can serve as an energy equity model for other communities to pursue.

The Bethel Clean Energy Project is an energy justice and education project designed for West Eugene residents living near dioxin polluter JH Baxter, a 40-acre site that is soon to be designated as a federal superfund site. During May 2024, Beyond Toxics, in partnership with the Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWEB), and with a grant from the Raindrop Fund, held the second in a series of cohorts designed to create Clean Energy Action Plans for their homes. This included receiving a Home Energy Score assessment from the Eugene Water and Electric Board, learning about the intersection between energy efficiency and climate preparedness, receiving competitive bids for energy efficiency improvements recommended in their Home Energy Scores, learning about currently available and soon to be available financial incentives, and making plans on when to install their projects taking into account when rebates will be available and remaining useful equipment life.

Key Takeaways

Increasing Awareness About Incentive Programs

Education about available incentive programs is highly needed. Most participants were unaware of all the incentive programs available and appreciated having a neutral third party to help walk them through bids.

Shift Towards High Efficiency Electric Appliances

Participants all moved towards wanting high-efficiency electric appliances over the course of the program as they learned about the incentives available for these appliances and about the climate and health concerns of natural gas. Participants went from being undecided or not knowing what type of system they wanted, to all wanting heat pumps and heat pump water heaters for their next space and water heating systems. The participants also increased their interest in induction stoves and heat pump clothes dryers.

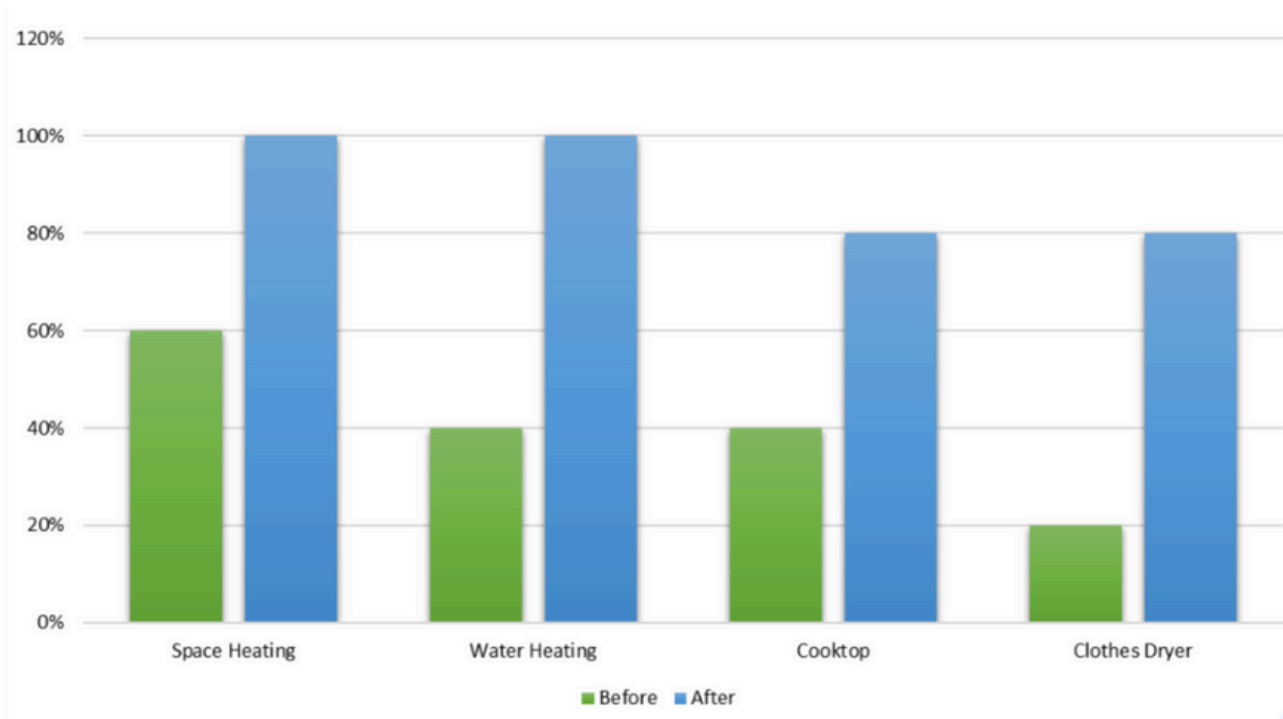
Leveraging Local Utility Partnerships For Clean Energy Planning

Partnerships with our local public utility are beneficial to the goals of the project by providing participants with a blueprint of the current energy uses and efficiency gaps upon which they can then build their Clean Energy Work Plan.

People's Preferences changed toward more efficient electric alternatives

Changes in Preferred Heating System Type

High Efficiency Electric Alternative as Top Choice





Concept Success

Recruitment

Beyond Toxics' door-to-door neighborhood canvassing, our Air Purifier Giveaway and the ABC newsletter were both useful tools in getting people to participate in the program

Workshop Format

The 4-week meeting schedule was the right amount of time to deliver educational concepts, get to know the participants and have individualized conversations and a one-on-one exit interview.

Adding Non Toxic Cleaning Curriculum

Participants responded very favorably to a 45-minute session on sustainable and non-toxic cleaning products to promote healthy air quality in the home

Effectiveness

Participants found the information very useful and would highly recommend the program to others. When asked "did you have a good experience?" participants responded:

- *"Yes we didn't know about the programs available. Learning all the new stuff was the highlight."*
- *"I did. I got a lot of good info that I knew nothing about before."*
- *"I thought it was great but we need to get more people involved. Would be happy to help in the outreach for the next cohort. Very good experience. Wish i hadn't bought a new water heater. Would have gotten the heat pump water heater and would use the incentives I learned about. Everything was clear. I was almost going to do it but appreciated the honesty that Zach said about it not making sense."*
- *"Had been planning to replace the system for a while. So this helped motivate and jump start us. Presentations were helpful, rebates breakdown was very helpful. Got some really beneficial information about air quality. Don't have gas appliances, didn't realize issues of air quality being around."*



Insights from Cohort 2.0

Participation Barriers

Although 15 households signed up to participate, the actual turnout was less than anticipated. We contacted those who originally signed up twice after the Cohort began. Some of the reasons given for not being able to attend were changes in work schedules, unexpected travel due to out-of-town family emergencies and inability to afford childcare.

Eligibility Limitations for Low-Income Rebates

The Cohort 2 participants were all working-class households living in a low-income neighborhood, yet they were surprised to learn that none of them qualified as low-income for purposes of EWEB, State of Oregon, or Federal Inflation Reduction Act Rebates

Hesitancy in HVAC Installation Sign-Ups

In order to coordinate with contractors, participants were asked to sign up for HVAC installation bids during the first meeting; however most participants were hesitant to do so without learning more about the affordability of energy upgrades and how to stack the available rebates.

Accessibility Options

Participants wanted printouts of slides and electronic versions of the materials available for them to study at home.

Insights for EWEB

Moderate Income Rebates & Loans

There is a need for moderate income households to receive both rebates and loans

Need for Comprehensive Project Access, Minimizing Risk

There is a need for an all-in-one solution to access projects with all rebates and loans included and without the risk of being taken advantage of.

Community Partnerships Streamline Customer Support, Information, and Services

Partnering with a community-based organization is beneficial to forming customer relationships, delivering accurate energy efficiency information, finding reputable contractors and, most of all, helping customers navigate the confusing information about eligibility, rebates, loans and other incentives.



Recommendations for Future Project Improvements

Pre-screening

Pre-Screen applicants based on income to ensure all/most are low income.

Increase Community Engagement Opportunities

Build in more opportunities for community building with additional group time at the end, discussions of JH Baxter, and opportunities to discuss people's concerns and visions for improving the neighborhood.

Postpone Contractor Sign-ups & Clarify Project Timeline Early On.

Delay Contractor Sign-ups until after the Rebates Stacking training and give a stronger map of how the project will go early on so participants know exactly what to expect

Provide Digital Access To Educational Materials

Although we provided 3-ring binders containing individual Home Energy Scores and all the educational materials, participants asked us to also provide electronic access to materials before and during the class.

Enhance Childcare Support Clarity & Availability

Be clearer about helping people with childcare, including offering babysitting at the event.

Time Next Cohort with Availability of IRA Rebates.

Wait to offer the next cohort until IRA rebates are available.