

Notes from EVAC discussion June 27 2018

On June 27, several members of EVAC met in person and over the phone to check in on how EVAC has been working and to provide feedback to the partnership. The meeting was set up and facilitated by co-chairs Abby Finis and Matt Kazinka. All EVAC members were invited, and those who were able to attend included Timothy DenHerder-Thomas, Trevor Drake, Becky Olson, Shane Stennes, Julia Silvis, and Billy Weber.

The conversation was framed around two primary questions:

1. How do you think it is going with EVAC, and what do you think has been effective or ineffective about EVAC's structure and work to date?
2. What changes would you like to see to help EVAC be more effective?

The notes below summarize the discussion that was held.

The relationship between EVAC, the CEP Board, and the Planning Team

It would be helpful to more clearly define EVAC's role in the partnership. EVAC wasn't given a lot of direction at the beginning, and EVAC members have worked to define EVAC's role as a relatively active one. It's unclear if there's tension among partnership members about how active EVAC is, and it would help the structure work better if there was a conversation that helped develop consensus around EVAC's role.

EVAC would also benefit from understanding the goals of each partner organization (Minneapolis, Xcel, CenterPoint) so we can better work towards goals in common. The goals of the City feel relatively clear given the Climate Action Plan and other commitments that the City has made. We'd appreciate it if the utilities could make clear what goals motivate them in the partnership to help us shape our recommendations.

The EVAC members present expressed a desire to see more of a culture of collaboration, especially in regards to how Xcel Energy and CenterPoint Energy approach the Partnership. We feel like the two utilities do not always approach the work of the Partnership in a way that reflects creative collaboration, in which all parties are developing ideas together, even though we know that many staff at the organizations have the knowledge and passion to pursue creative approaches. For example, when the City expressed an interest in 100% renewable electricity, it was our impression that Xcel laid out its standard options and responded to the City's expression of interest in alternative options through internal review within the company, as opposed to investigation with the City and partners like EVAC. We'd love to have more opportunities to communicate directly with utility employees and program managers to collaboratively develop ideas for meeting goals that EVAC and the Board set out.

In general, it would be really helpful to have more active direction and engagement from Board members. We don't expect Board members to be involved in the day-to-day work of managing EVAC that the Planning Team staff does, but it would be great if there was more direct relationship building between Board members and EVAC members to help improve partnership. Perhaps a working meeting with all EVAC and CEP Board members would be one way to improve collaboration between the two bodies. It may also be useful for EVAC members to have working meetings with each individual partner organization (Minneapolis, Xcel, CenterPoint) to help address some of the items listed above.

We also think it would be helpful to bring in an outside facilitator to help with managing the partnership. We see the challenging situations that Planning Team staff are put into as they manage several different entities and different interests, and we think it may help to have some outside professional help to allow each organization to participate fully and to ensure the process works well.

Priorities and goals

We feel like the three main priorities recently set by the Board are very large, encompassing almost everything we've been working on. It would be helpful to know if the three priorities carry the same weight and how the priorities clarify the work of the Partnership.

We also discussed the need for the Partnership to develop goals around reducing energy costs disparities and equity, and determine methods for measuring our progress towards those goals. It's one of the big pieces we are missing and feels like it should be core to the work of the Partnership.

Franchise fee

We feel that the passage of the franchise fee increase was one of the most significant outcomes of the work that EVAC has done to date. We want to have a role in ensuring that it is spent wisely and to make sure that the right precedents are set in these first few years.

We support the City of Minneapolis using some of the funds to invest in more staffing, as we see understaffing as one of the primary challenges to advancing the goals of the partnership. We also want to urge caution about spending significant amounts of the franchise fee funds on renewable energy programs like Renewable*Connect, which only have a short-term impact on climate and don't create long-lasting change.

Natural gas & electrification

We discussed the challenge that electrification will pose to the Partnership. We recognize that there are some barriers to pursuing electrification immediately and think that it's important in the short run that we help people who are going to invest in natural gas equipment make efficient choices.

However, we also know that we cannot afford to build out significantly more natural gas infrastructure if we want to meet our climate goals in the long run. We can and should also invest in scalable options for renewable gas (anaerobic digesters, district heating, etc.) to reduce emissions for the natural gas uses that cannot feasibly be electrified. We urge the Partnership to begin discussing this challenge more openly and to make a plan for how Minneapolis will be a leader in strategic electrification.

Community Voices

We discussed the Community Voices section that we have hosted at many of our recent meetings. It's useful to have the conversations at the user experience level, but we thought it would be worth being more intentional about how we do it to get a wider variety of voices that more directly relate to the work of the Partnership and the conversations we are having at EVAC.

We determined that we would like to bring in more voices directly related to the franchise fee programming in future meetings. We'd like to work with staff to identify when and where are the best opportunities to bring speakers in to EVAC meetings to speak about some of the work that is launching this year - e.g. landlords from the Community Engagement RFP, Home Energy Squad participants who receive financing, businesses who are served by E-TAP providers, etc.

We'd also like to encourage our work groups to bring in more non-EVAC members to participate, providing another opportunity for community members to engage in EVAC.

Future EVAC cohorts

We offered some recommendations for what the Partnership should consider as it launches the process for bringing on new EVAC members.

First, we think there would be value in expanding the breadth of voices and perspectives on EVAC. This should include shifting the demographic representation of the group to include more women and people of color. It also should include bringing in more members that can represent a greater diversity of professional expertise. We noted in particular that it would be valuable to have more expertise in commercial and industrial buildings and markets on the committee.

We would also want to ensure that future EVAC to be an engaged, active committee with members that can contribute time to projects. EVAC has been successful in part because it has several members who can commit significant time to editing documents and participating in work groups, ad-hoc meetings, and hearings. Very little work can be accomplished in four 2-hour meetings, and the Partnership should seek out EVAC members who will be prepared for a greater level of participation than simply attending four meetings a year.