

A Study of Priorities, Ideas, and Concerns of the SDCEA Membership through a Facilitated Community Engagement Process January 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ark Valley Coalition for a Sustainable Energy Future (AVEF) is a 501c3 corporation registered in the state of Colorado. While it was formed in response to a rate structure change proposed by the Sangre de Cristo Electric Association (SDCEA) leadership, the overarching mission of AVEF is to advocate for a responsible, clean energy future for SDCEA cooperative members.

In the fall of 2022, AVEF embarked on a community engagement process to learn from SDCEA members how they felt about their electric cooperative, the clean energy transition, renewable energy, and the role of AVEF in the community.

To determine what members thought, AVEF hired a professional facilitator to help formulate and facilitate the community engagement process. This consisted of two parts: an online survey and three in-person community engagement sessions that were held in Howard, Poncha Springs, and Buena Vista in January 2023.

The public input process, described in depth in this report, provided the AVEF directors many insights that led to next steps for our organization.

We identified a clear desire among participants of the engagement process for better communications, relationship building, and transparency between SDCEA leadership and their co-op members. Many of the members would like SDCEA to act as a future partner in obtaining more renewable energy options and developing innovative ways to generate cleaner electricity, including an overall plan that moves in this direction more quickly.

Based on this input, AVEF will advance these immediate goals by forming two working groups:

• The **Clean Energy Transition Group** will investigate ways that cooperatives like SDCEA can take a more sustainable approach to electric energy generation and consumption, as well as find out how programs and infrastructure can support community members at all income levels.

• The **Election Working Group** will evaluate and support SDCEA board candidates, new and incumbent, who can successfully help steer the cooperative through a transition to a future with clean energy.

Results of the community input process also showed a strong interest in education about clean energy topics. Educating more members will help them feel empowered to speed up their own energy transition (heat pumps, electric vehicles, energy efficiency) and support AVEF's vision of a responsible, clean energy future. At the same time, this aligns with SDCEA's promotion of Beneficial Electrification.

AVEF will advance this ongoing goal by forming an additional working group:

The Education Working Group will inform people about clean/renewable energyrelated topics so that they can increase efficiency and save money on an individual
level. Initially, the group will create a speakers' series and interactive events to
share knowledge about energy topics as they pertain both to individuals and
communities.

By participating in each of these work groups, volunteers will engage with AVEF initiatives as well as achieve a better understanding of SDCEA policies and programs. The work groups will evolve over time, and the AVEF directors are receptive to feedback concerning them. We believe that nearly all of the ideas brought out through the community engagement process can be folded into and eventually addressed within these groupings. The many ideas that were received through this process will be revisited as we proceed through 2023 so that additional work groups can arise on an ongoing basis and new volunteers can come forward to work on them.

The success of the above priorities and any number of the other ideas brought forward during the community engagement process will depend on willing and energetic volunteers to work on them. AVEF invites you to please contact us by email at arkvalleycoalition@gmail.com if you would like to help with any of the working groups detailed above. We can't wait to hear from and involve you in our efforts!

This report explains how and why AVEF came to be and the steps AVEF took in its community engagement process. We also share data and findings from our online survey and our three community engagement meetings. Lastly, we summarize the key priorities that came out of the community engagement process and provide next steps.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our sincere thanks go out to everyone who participated in the AVEF community engagement process through the survey and attendance at the meetings. We would also

like to acknowledge the elected leaders, past and present, of the Town of Buena Vista, Chaffee County, and SDCEA that attended and participated in the meetings.

We were pleased with the level of participation in the online survey and three community engagement meetings. Attendees were respectful of each other and showed great willingness to share their ideas and thoughts about their SDCEA cooperative, the clean energy transition, their renewable energy desires, and their ideas to carry AVEF forward.

A special thank you goes to Kim Smoyer of Smoyer & Associates for her leadership and skillful facilitation during this community engagement process. This has been an amazing experience for the AVEF directors. We are humbled and encouraged by the level of interest you all have expressed in our clean energy future!

AVEF Directors:

Tom Plant
Rich Shoemaker
Sandy Long
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rate Restructuring

In January of 2022, SDCEA announced a new rate structure to be applied to members' bills beginning February 1, 2022. The rate changes were adopted in October 2021 in executive session, which precluded input from co-op members. Among the changes of concern were the following:

- The proposed rates raised the fixed charge for all members by 45%, so that lower income members would have to pay over \$53 per month before they turned on their first light.
- The proposed rates unbundled the cost of electricity into energy (kWh) and distribution fees. Net metered users (solar, wind, hydro) would be charged the distribution services charge of \$0.059 per kWh whenever they pulled electricity from the grid. This changed the net metering of these members to net billing and was in violation of the Colorado Net Metering Law.
- The proposed rates disincentivized energy conservation by decreasing the bills of high energy users (over 590 kwh/month) and penalizing with higher rates low energy users (less than 590 kwh/month), adversely impacting those who strive to conserve energy and fixed and lower-income members.

1.2 Community Response

Seven SDCEA co-op members met to discuss actions to take in opposition to the proposed rate changes. They were not alone: 175 co-op members attended the January SDCEA board

meeting and 40 people made public comment that spanned 2.5 hours. In addition, 780 people signed an online petition asking for SDCEA to reconsider their rate changes. Together, co-op members were able to convince SDCEA to postpone and ultimately rescind the proposed rates.

1.3 AVEF Formation and Accomplishments

The volunteer group of seven members incorporated as the Ark Valley Coalition for a Sustainable Energy Future (AVEF) in the state of Colorado on February 7, 2022. Since formation, AVEF has accomplished a lot with the help of its advocates and supporters:

- Cost of Service Study: AVEF asked questions about the rate study that SDCEA's
 consultant used to design the rate changes, in order to share information with co-op
 members and understand how the rate study was designed. Our questions have
 remained unanswered, making it difficult to help members understand both the
 previously proposed rate structuring and any rate changes that SDCEA might
 propose in the future.
- **501c3 Status:** AVEF applied for and achieved 501c3 status from the IRS effective February 2022. As such, the organization has been able to accept donations from members from across the SDCEA service area. AVEF met its fundraising goals set for 2022 and looks forward to continued participation as we continue to pursue our mission.
- Communication Channels: AVEF established communication channels with a
 website, Facebook page, and a growing email list. We have communicated with
 AVEF advocates steadily throughout 2022. We have also virtually attended and
 provided public comment at all SDCEA monthly board meetings and used our
 website to share up-to-date notes from those meetings for members who are
 unable to attend the meetings.
- **Campaign for New SDCEA Board Members:** AVEF executed a successful campaign this year for SDCEA board members from Custer and Fremont counties, and encouraged a record turn-out for the election. The election established better engagement in co-op governance among many members.
- **Member Advisory Panel:** AVEF developed and advocated for the adoption of a Member Advisory Panel (MAP) by the SDCEA board to increase transparency and member involvement; however, SDCEA has not yet taken action.
- Educational Presentations: AVEF leadership has informed themselves and co-op members about clean and sustainable energy via the website, Facebook page, and webinars. Two web-based seminars were held in conjunction with the Chaffee County Citizens' Climate Lobby on electric vehicles and heat pumps. Tom Plant, AVEF Chair, also gave a talk on Earth Day about the funding and tax credits available through the Inflation Reduction Act.
- **Green Homes Tour:** AVEF assisted GARNA and New Energy Colorado in promoting and participating in the Chaffee County Green Homes Tour.
- **Energy Planning Groups:** AVEF has been invited to the discussion table for the Chaffee County Sustainability Plan, particularly the Energy Focus Group; meetings about geothermal potential in the valley; and Salida's Partners in Energy Workshops that are sponsored by Xcel Energy's community collaboration program.

• Town of Buena Vista Presentation: AVEF presented to the Town of Buena Vista Administrator and Trustees to promote the possibility of micro-grid and other clean energy projects in the Arkansas Valley that can help make workforce housing and electricity more affordable and cleaner.

The outcome of the AVEF activities of 2022 was the interest in and need for an engagement process to hear and learn from the membership of the SDCEA co-op. SDCEA has been encouraged to conduct a broad-based membership survey, but, so far, they have declined. As a result, AVEF embarked on this community engagement project from October 2022 to January 2023.

2.0 METHODS

AVEF hired Kim Smoyer of Smoyer & Associates to design and facilitate a community engagement process that began in October 2022 and concluded in January 2023. The process included two distinct elements: first, an online survey tool designed by Kim Smoyer and AVEF directors; and second, three in-person community engagement meetings held at several locations within the SDCEA service territory in early January.

2.1 Online Community Engagement Survey

The first phase of the engagement process was to ask a subset of SDCEA members what were the most important topics on which to focus our in-person meetings. An invitation to participate in the online survey was sent to the 300+ individuals on the AVEF mailing list. AVEF was unable to obtain (from the SDCEA board or staff) an email list of the entire SDCEA 13,000+ membership, therefore the results of the survey include only those members who are already affiliated with AVEF or accessed the public link through the AVEF website, through social media outlets, e-blasts to AVEF directors' networks and groups, and the GARNA and Pleasant Valley neighborhood newsletters. The survey was open for a four-and-a-half-week period between November 2 and November 28, 2022.

The survey instrument was divided into three sections:

- Service Provider Needs Data
- SDCEA Opinion Data
- AVEF Information Data

This survey was designed to inform and focus discussions for the in-person community engagement meetings.

2.2 In-Person Community Engagement Meetings

In January 2023, AVEF hosted meetings in Howard, Poncha Springs, and Buena Vista. Announcements of the meetings appeared on the AVEF website and Facebook pages; in ads in the local papers (Chaffee County Times, Mountain Mail, Ark Valley Voice, Sangre de

Cristo Sentinel); in Letters to the Editors in local newspapers; and in the GARNA newsletter, the Pleasant Valley neighborhood newsletter, and other group messages.

Community members were asked to register for a meeting and were provided with a clear set of goals and outcomes for the meeting, which included:

- Provide more information about AVEF and our role.
- Share the results of the community engagement survey,
- Discuss some of the challenges identified by AVEF and community members through the survey,
- Develop ideas and solutions to address those challenges, and
- Formulate action plans that include ways that volunteers can help AVEF take the next steps.

Each of the meetings was held over a 2-hour timeframe in three communities within the SDCEA service territory:

- Howard (January 7)
- Poncha Springs (January 10)
- Buena Vista (January 12)

A copy of the online survey summary findings and insights was provided to attendees. Participants were asked to review the information and provide their own insights into the barriers (What's stopping us?) and drivers (What are the reasons why we want to address these barriers?). They were then asked to brainstorm ideas for solutions in five key areas that arose out of the online survey. Ideas and potential solutions were submitted by meeting participants on sticky notes. Action items were developed, and individuals had an opportunity to volunteer for specific tasks in the future.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Community Engagement Online Survey (See <u>Appendix 1</u> for complete Survey Report)

Data and Findings:

A total of 228 individuals initiated the survey and 214 successfully completed the survey between November 3 and November 28, 2022. The data and findings from the AVEF community engagement survey include the following:

- The majority (95%) of responses (204) come from those who identified SDCEA as their electric provider and receive those services in Chaffee County (86%).
- The majority (81%) of respondents are either *very satisfied* (37%) or *satisfied* (44%) with the **overall reliability** of electrical services.
- The majority (53%) of respondents are either *very dissatisfied* (14%) or *dissatisfied* (39%) with the **cost** of services.

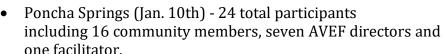
- The majority (61%) of respondents are either *very dissatisfied* (21%) or *dissatisfied* (40%) with the **amount of renewable energy their electric cooperative supplies.**
- Fifty-five percent (55%) of the respondents **generate their own electricity through solar.**
- Fifty-six percent (56%) of the respondents (86) said that they would be purchasing an **electric vehicle** in the next 5 years.
- Eighty-two percent (82%) of the respondents think that **SDCEA should be a partner in renewable energy efforts** (that are part of development projects in their territory, such as solar and battery storage for affordable housing, or microgrid setup for new subdivisions).
- Sixty-six percent (66%) of the respondents want **SDCEA Board meetings recorded** and shared with the membership.
- The majority (70%) of respondents are either *dissatisfied* (45%) or *very dissatisfied* (25%) with the **transparency of operations and decision making** at SDCEA.
- The majority (57%) of respondents are either *dissatisfied* (39%) or *very dissatisfied* (18%) with the **SDCEA's member engagement response to concerns and suggestions**.
- The majority (94%) of the respondents were either *very likely* (70%) or *likely* (24%) to **participate in a survey should SDCEA decide to conduct one**.
- Many (84%) of the respondents believe that the speed **at which SDCEA** is **transitioning to a new energy economy** is either *not fast enough* (67.5%) or *not at all* (16.5%).
- The majority (87%) of the respondents believe that **SDCEA should be working to generate more local clean, renewable energy**.
- The majority (87%) of respondents think it is either *extremely important* (67%) or *very important* (20%) for **SDCEA to incentivize energy conservation and clean energy use**.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the respondents (176) also **support rooftop solar net metering and battery storage** if it enhances local power resiliency.
- Eighty-one percent (81%) of respondents think it is important to **protect low-income users from high electric rates.**
- The majority (61%) of respondents are **aware that SDCEA** is currently obligated to purchase 95% of the power they provide from Tri-State Generation and Transmission.
- Ninety-one percent (91%) of the respondents want SDCEA to **study the costs and benefits of a full or partial exit** from Tri-State to cut costs and increase the use of local renewable energy.
- The majority (78%) of respondents are **aware of AVEF** and its mission and 88% have **visited the AVEF website**.
- A majority (91%) of respondents are either *very interested* (67%) or *somewhat interested* (24%) in **distributed generation using rooftop solar.**
- Eighty-eight percent (88%) of respondents are either *very interested* (58%) or *somewhat interested* (30%) in a **community solar program.**
- Seventy-four percent (74%) of the respondents are either *very interested* (36%) or *somewhat interested* (38%) in **wind**.

• Fifty percent (50%) of respondents **provided their contact information and expressed an interest in learning more about AVEF** and attending a community meeting in January 2023. Ninety percent (90%) prefer to be **contacted by email**.

3.2 In-Person Community Engagement Meetings

A total of 111 people attended the three community meetings in Howard, Poncha Springs, and Buena Vista, Colorado, in January 2023.

 Howard (Jan. 7th) - 35 total participants including 28 community members (two were SDCEA board members), six AVEF directors and one facilitator.





 Buena Vista (Jan. 12th) - 65 total participants including 58 community members (three were SDCEA board members), five AVEF directors and two facilitators.



3.2.1 Barriers and Drivers

Participants at each meeting brainstormed and developed a list of barriers that limit solutions to the findings of the community engagement survey and identified some of the drivers that might encourage solutions. The following were responses provided by those in attendance at all three meetings (in priority order by most mentions and by category type):

Barriers (What's stopping us?)

- **SDCEA Issues**: transparency, decision-making process, unwillingness to engage in a two-way dialogue, unresponsiveness to member inquiries and questions, resistance to change, ivory tower perception, and unwillingness to share data and information.
- **Member Issues**: apathy, lack of awareness, historic lack of involvement, lack of knowledge (complexity of issues), and small number of members that are engaged and responsible for affecting change.

- **Costs, Affordability & Debt**: constrained by Tri-State agreement, geographic limitations/topography, cost structure, perceived costs, price, affordability, cost of infrastructure investments, debt, reputation as high-priced, and lack of information about funding opportunities (local, state and federal levels).
- Relationship Between SDCEA Leadership & Members: unwillingness to compromise, general lack of respect for each other's perspectives, difficulty engaging and communicating with each other, poor and mis- or dis-information communications, and vilification of each other.
- **Missed Opportunities**: no clear goals, outdated business model, needed upgrades/changes, alternative and other revenue sources, innovation and new technologies, and address safety/security concerns.

<u>Drivers</u> (What are the reasons why we want to address these barriers?)

- **Opportunities**: local economic benefits, local control, more options for members, builds excitement for what's possible, builds grid resiliency, utilizes CO resources (wind and sun), be more future-oriented, builds a good reputation, creates more jobs and income for locals with innovation and new technologies, and addresses safety/security concerns.
- **Environment**: helps environmental sustainability, builds for future generations, addresses issues of climate change, aligns with why we live here, builds more support for renewable energy options, increases health (personal and environmental) and prosperity.
- **Costs, Affordability & Debt**: increase supply (demand is already here), federal and state monies are available, cost savings, reduce transmission costs, value of solar power (and other clean energy sources), decrease costs, and current reputation as highest cost co-op adversely impacts property values.
- **Member Issues**: ways to support each other, creates more member benefits, members care and should have a say and feel empowered, provides oversight, and members have the responsibility to provide oversight (especially with no other regulatory authority).
- Relationship Between SDCEA Leadership & Members: greater accountability, develops trust, show up and participate in board meetings, avoid possible legal issues, builds pride in the co-op and membership, and addresses mis- or disinformation.

3.2.2 In-Person Engagement Sessions Ideas and Solutions

Respondents to the online survey helped identify five areas of concentration for the community engagement meetings. These main focal topics were:

- **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**: To support a better relationship between members and the SDCEA leadership to build trust, better communication, transparency, and responsiveness.
- **CLEAN ENERGY TRANSITION:** To encourage SDCEA to take a more sustainable approach to electric energy generation and consumption, with the purpose of

contributing to the clean energy transition and improving the affordability and resiliency of electric energy into the future.

- **EDUCATION:** To inform people about clean/renewable energy-related topics so that they can increase efficiency and save money on a household level.
- **ENGAGEMENT:** To involve more people in planning for AVEF initiatives going forward.
- **ADVOCACY:** To advocate for low-income members and projects that support energy innovations that provide electricity locally at a lower cost for all members of our community.

Participants then were asked to brainstorm ideas for how to address the challenges and the barriers related to the five areas of concentration. A total of 265 ideas and potential solutions were submitted by meeting participants.

To organize the wide variety of ideas, the ideas were clustered into similar or like categories with 17 topics such as how to better engage in SDCEA board meetings, how to encourage local control of energy production, and how to accomplish in-person community organizing. Then, each idea was sorted into the five areas of concentration upon which the in-person meetings were focused.

To see each of the 265 ideas:

See **Appendix 2** for ideas sorted by meeting locations.

See **Appendix 3** for ideas identified by 17 categories and sorted into the five areas of concentration.

Some comments were not captured under the five concentration areas. Meeting participants were asked to share those comments, observations, questions, ideas, and insights they had on a separate poster sheet:

See **Appendix 4** for Other Comments.

3.2.3 Road Maps and Action Plans

Participants were asked to break into groups based on the five concentration areas and develop a road map and action plan for moving initiatives forward. Participants identified the top two or three ideas in each of the five concentration areas about which they were informed, experienced, or passionate. In the limited time available, specific action items were developed for these ideas and people were encouraged to volunteer to move these actions forward. Although many participants signed up to help, the time available was primarily used to discuss and prioritize ideas and actions. AVEF will be seeking volunteers to facilitate next steps.

See **Appendix 5** for action plan ideas sorted by the five concentration areas.

4.0 CONCLUSION and NEXT STEPS

4.1 Online Survey Insights and Recommendations

Based on the data/findings outlined above and open-ended response analysis, the following **insights** and **recommendations** emerged:

- There is a need for better communication and relationship building between SDCEA leadership and constituents, members, and potential customers. AVEF may be able to advance this through representation on or at the board level or through a facilitated cooperative process to share perspectives and points of view to advise and inform all those concerned.
- Survey respondents would like to see the SDCEA leadership be more transparent, communicative, collaborative, and open about their decision-making process and operations. They also want to be engaged by SDCEA through an online survey or other mechanism for obtaining member feedback and through educational information that supports SDCEA operational decisions.
- Survey respondents want the SDCEA operations to be more supportive of renewable energy through incentives, initiatives, and strategic efforts. Respondents are highly interested in renewable energy sources and would like SDCEA to act as a partner in obtaining more of these options and developing more innovative ways to generate cleaner electricity for their members. They would also like to see SDCEA create a plan that moves in this direction and provides more information and education regarding renewables to its membership.
- Survey respondents want more diverse and inclusive representation on the SDCEA board and for board meetings to be more accessible to the membership by recording and posting the meetings for members to review.
- Survey respondents also want a fair and clear rate structure including for those who
 locally generate solar and use other renewable power sources. They want SDCEA to
 find ways to lower electricity costs and protect low-income residents from high
 electric rates.
- Survey respondents want SDCEA to consider studying the costs and benefits of a full or partial exit from Tri-State.

4.2 In-Person Engagement Session Insights and Recommendations

The AVEF directors synthesized the large volume of data received from the community engagement process and worked to prioritize the many ideas collected.

We identified a clear desire for better communications, relationship building, and transparency between SDCEA leadership and the co-op members. Participants would like

SDCEA to act as a future partner in obtaining more renewable energy options and developing innovative ways to generate cleaner electricity. They would also like AVEF to play a responsible role in guiding SDCEA leadership to an overall plan that moves in this direction more quickly.

Results of the community input process also showed a strong interest in education about clean energy topics. Educating more members will help them feel empowered to speed up their own energy transition (heat pumps, electric vehicles, energy efficiency) and support AVEF's vision of a responsible, clean energy future. At the same time, this aligns with SDCEA's promotion of Beneficial Electrification.

In response to these priorities, three work groups rose to the top. With the help of volunteers, AVEF would like to pursue each of these in 2023. The proposed work groups are:

- The **Clean Energy Transition Group**, which will investigate ways that cooperatives like SDCEA can take a more sustainable approach to electric energy generation and consumption, as well as find out how programs and infrastructure can support community members at all income levels.
- The **Election Working Group**, which will evaluate and support SDCEA board candidates, new and incumbent, who can successfully help steer the co-op through a transition to a future with clean energy.
- The Education Working Group, which will inform people about clean/renewable energy-related topics so that they can increase efficiency and save money on an individual level. Initially, the group will create a speakers' series and interactive events to share knowledge about energy topics as they pertain both to individuals and communities.

By participating in each of these work groups, volunteers will engage with AVEF initiatives as well as achieve a better understanding of SDCEA policies and programs. The work groups will evolve over time, and we are receptive to feedback concerning them. We believe that nearly all of the ideas brought out through the community engagement process can be folded into and eventually addressed within these groupings. The many ideas that were received through this process will be revisited as we proceed through 2023 so that new work groups can arise on an ongoing basis and new volunteers can come forward to work on them.

4.3 Volunteering to Help through the Road Map and Action Plan

In **Appendix 5**, you will find the Road Map and Action Plan spreadsheet based on responses during the community engagement meetings to each of the five areas of concentration. The success of the listed actions and any number of the other ideas brought forward during the community engagement process will depend on willing and energetic volunteers to work on them.

Once you have looked at the spreadsheet, please take the time to **follow up by email at arkvalleycoalition@gmail.com**:

- If you volunteered and your name is on the spreadsheet, please confirm that you still want to be involved on tasks by which your name is recorded. Your task will be addressed by one of the three work groups.
- If your name has been left out by mistake by a task in which you expressed interest at the meeting you attended, please let us know.
- For those of you who did not get an opportunity to volunteer for a task at the meeting, please contact us if you would like to help with any of the work groups detailed in this report or on any individual task outlined in Appendix 5.

AVEF will meet with or identify the leaders of the priority work groups in the near future and volunteers will be contacted personally as the work groups begin to convene in the next few weeks.

We can't wait to hear from and involve you in our efforts!

5.0 APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Complete Online Survey Report

Appendix 1: https://www.arkansasvalleyenergyfuture.org/s/Appendix-1-Complete-Survey-Report.pdf

Appendix 2: Meeting results summaries

Meetings in each of the three communities were held over a 2-hour timeframe. Summaries from each of those meetings can be found at the following PDF link:

Appendix 2: https://www.arkansasvalleyenergyfuture.org/s/Append-2-Howard-Poncha-Springs-and-Buena-Vista-Meeting-Summaries.pdf

Appendix 3: Ideas Submitted at Meetings

Below is a PDF link to all of the ideas submitted in each of the 5 concentration areas with their idea category ID.

Appendix 3: https://www.arkansasvalleyenergyfuture.org/s/Appendix-3-Ideas-Submitted-at-Meetings.pdf

Appendix 4: Other Comments from Meetings

Appendix 4: https://www.arkansasvalleyenergyfuture.org/s/Appendix-4-Other-Comments-from-Meetings.pdf

Appendix 5: Road Maps and Action Plans

Appendix 5: https://www.arkansasvalleyenergyfuture.org/s/Appendix-5-Road-Map-and-Action-Plan.pdf

End of Report