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The Utah Model: How a Red State Became a Renewable Energy Testbed

Luke Cartin, Board Member, Mountain Towns 2030

Utah's state rock is coal and its legislature is 88% Republican, yet 16 communities now have a regulator-approved path to 100% renewable electricity. Park City's Luke Cartin explained how they did it by framing the work around choice, cost and benefits rather than carbon, and what other towns can copy.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **The franchise agreement can get you a seat.** Park City and Salt Lake City offered five-year electric franchise agreements instead of the usual 30, giving Rocky Mountain Power a reason to negotiate.
2. **Don't go it alone.** Park City, Salt Lake City and Summit County aligned on one goal, pairing a big load with a credible threat, and signed a joint clean energy statement with the utility in 2017.
3. **Talk costs and benefits, not carbon.** Two words, "and benefits," shaped the 2019 Community Renewable Energy Act, which passed with two-thirds majorities. Rural counties backed it for solar jobs and tax base.
4. **Opt-out drives participation.** Opt-in programs often reach 35 to 40%. Organizers expect about 80% of residential customers to stay in Utah's opt-out program.
5. **Long-term power deals cut risk.** The 80 MW Elektron solar project on state trust land saves Salt Lake City about $1.5M a year and Park City about $90,000, with costs locked in for 25 years.

WHAT LOCAL OFFICIALS CAN DO

- ☐ **Shorten your utility franchise agreement.** A five-year term brings the utility back to the table regularly.
- ☐ **Commission your own pathways study.** Studying options like community choice aggregation showed the utility you were serious.
- ☐ **Form an interlocal agency.** Utah's Community Renewable Energy Agency lets 16 communities speak with one voice; every vote so far has been unanimous.
- ☐ **Line up city and utility lobbyists together.** Legislators took notice when both backed the same bill.
- ☐ **Protect low-income customers.** Utah's low-income credit equals the $4 monthly charge, so they join at no cost.
- ☐ **Pick your fights.** When the state struck "renewable" and allowed nuclear, Park City let it go to keep the program safe.
- ☐ **Frame energy as local dollars.** Park City estimated its fossil fuel spend at about $245M a year, money that leaves town.

BY THE NUMBERS

16
Communities enrolled by ordinance

~25%
Of Rocky Mountain Power sales in those communities

$4/mo
Residential charge, free for low-income customers

80 MW
Elektron solar project on state trust land

$1.5M/yr
Salt Lake City's net savings from Elektron

12 years
Of renewable contracts the reserve fund will cover

WATCH OUT FOR

- ! Lawmakers keep revisiting the law, and a draft bill that would effectively kill the program may be run in the next 45-day session.
- ! It takes years: Salt Lake City and Park City started in 2014, and the work outlasted four mayors and three sustainability directors.

RESOURCES

Utah Renewable Communities
utahrenewablecommunities.org

Community Renewable Energy Act
Utah H.B. 411 (2019), full history on le.utah.gov

Utah Clean Energy
utahcleanenergy.org

EIA natural gas prices
eia.gov/naturalgas

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CONTACTS

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