



Transparency and Community Engagement

(15 points)

Introduction

MLPs are democratic institutions. They are governed by either an elected or appointed board and are directly responsible to the communities they serve. The democratic nature of MLPs makes them a unique and preferable type of utility. The programs and practices MLPs implement to afford decision-making power to residents must be protected and enhanced to every extent possible.

For MLPs to operate as effective democratic institutions, residents and customers need access to information about their MLP's decision-making processes and information about their MLP's operations. Engaging community members frequently by soliciting input and feedback is also foundational to the democratic nature of MLPs. MLPs that demonstrate a clear process for integrating community feedback and changing policies in direct response to residents' input reflect the highest standard of a democratically governed public institution.

This section assesses the extent to which MLPs are transparent in decision-making processes and operations, and whether MLPs frequently seek input from community members on issues of renewable energy and energy efficiency. Although we do not capture the full scope of outreach strategies and practices, this section uses general metrics that MCAN adopted as indicators of an MLP's commitment to engaging community residents in decision making and being transparent about decisions regarding programs, operations, and resource allocation.

Following a discussion of our methods and analysis of the results, we outline recommendations for how MLPs can enhance their efforts to be transparent about operations and decision-making processes as well as responsive to community interests.

Transparency and Community Engagement Scoring Methods

For this Scorecard, MCAN focused on three general areas when evaluating MLPs’ transparency and community engagement (see **Table 10**). To determine whether MLPs made information about decision-making processes and operations readily available, we identified whether key information was listed on MLPs’ websites. To determine whether recent efforts were made to solicit input on clean energy, MCAN identified whether surveys or community forums were recently conducted and the extent to which the results influenced MLP policy. Finally, to indicate

TABLE 10

TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SCORING METRICS AND CATEGORIES

METRICS	TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE	FACTORS	SCORING SUMMARY
ACCESSIBILITY OF GOVERNING AND OPERATIONS INFORMATION	8	Based on the four factors listed below	Full points awarded if all four factors were satisfied
▶ DPU REPORT AND FINANCIAL REPORTS ON WEBSITE	2	Presence of an updated DPU report and/or financial reports on website	Full points awarded if a report from 2019 or later was available

TABLE 10

TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SCORING METRICS AND CATEGORIES

METRICS	TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE	FACTORS	SCORING SUMMARY
▶ LIGHT BOARD MEETING TIMES ON WEBSITE	2	The date and time of upcoming light board meeting(s) were clearly listed on website or calendar	Full points awarded if date and time were listed
▶ LIGHT BOARD CONTACT INFORMATION ON WEBSITE	2	Contact information for at least one, but ideally all, light plant board members was listed on website	Full points awarded if contact information was listed
▶ UPDATED MINUTES FROM LIGHT BOARD MEETINGS	2	Minutes from light board meetings were up to date (allowing for a lag of 2 months) and available on website	Full points awarded if meetings were listed and up to date
OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY TO AFFECT DECISION MAKING (ON CLEAN ENERGY)	5	Surveyed residents on renewable energy in the last 3 years, held a forum on renewable energy in the last 3 years, community input from such events substantially impacted policies and/or strategy	Scores based on whether MLPs had conducted a survey or community forum that included discussion of renewable energy in the last 3 years. Full points awarded if either took place and if community input substantially guided or changed MLP policy.
INFORMATION SHARING FOR MCAN'S ANALYSIS	2	MLP responded to MCAN's questionnaires	Full points awarded if MLP responded to full questionnaire; partial points awarded if MLP only responded to follow-up questionnaire

TOTAL**15 + BONUS POINTS**

TABLE 10

TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SCORING METRICS AND CATEGORIES

BONUS

METRICS	TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE	FACTORS	SCORING SUMMARY
LISTS RECENT POWER SUPPLY ON WEBSITE AND IS EXPLICIT ABOUT REC RETIREMENT	8	Presence of power supply from 2019 or later is on website (in a report linked to website did not count), whether MLP discussed their REC retirement strategy, whether MLP accurately represented clean energy based on REC retirement	Full points awarded if power supply was present, there was a discussion of MLP's REC retirement, and clean energy was accurately represented based on REC retirement. Partial points were awarded for presence of power supply and discussion of REC retirement strategy
TOTAL	8		

an MLP's willingness to share information about internal operations, we scored the extent to which an MLP provided information to MCAN for the purposes of this Scorecard. Significant bonus points were provided for MLPs that were transparent about REC retirement and the renewable portions of their energy mix based on the number of RECs retired in 2019 or later.

The availability of information documenting MLPs' decision-making processes and operations accounted for a large proportion of points in this category. To determine information availability, MCAN prioritized four key pieces of information that should be easily accessible to community members and identified whether this information was available on MLPs' websites. The four categories of information listed above rep-

resent some of the basic information residents need to stay informed and involved in decision-making processes.

The other metrics in this category were MLPs' willingness to share public information and community engagement. As a proxy for an MLP's willingness to share information, we awarded points to MLPs that submitted responses to MCAN's Scorecard questionnaires used for the purposes of this report. To determine the extent of community engagement on issues related to MLP clean energy programs, MCAN scored MLPs based on whether they had conducted a customer survey or hosted a community forum on a topic related to clean energy within the past three years. Further, we scored whether community input from this outreach noticeably influenced MLPs' policies and long-term strategies. MCAN relied on responses to our questionnaire to determine whether community input had a noticeable impact. When not available, MCAN scanned MLPs' websites for evidence of survey results that the MLP acknowledged as having been impactful. When neither information source was available, we were unable to award full points.

In the Bonus section, MLPs were awarded additional points for providing information about their power supply, discussing their REC retirement in a detailed and quantitative way, and clearly identifying the percentage of clean and non-emitting energy on the basis of the RECs and EFECs they retired on their website. Score totals for this category are listed in **Table 11**.

TABLE 11

MLP SCORES IN TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

MUNICIPAL UTILITY	ACCESSIBILITY OF GOVERNING INFORMATION 8 PTS	OPPORTUNITIES TO AFFECT DECISION MAKING 5 PTS	INFORMATION SHARING 2 PTS	BONUS 8 PTS	TRANSPARENCY SCORE 15 PTS
BELMONT	8	5	2	6	21
CONCORD	8	3	2	8	21
IPSWICH	8	5	2	6	21
WEST BOYLSTON	8	5	2	6	21
HOLYOKE	8	5	2	2	17
MIDDLEBOROUGH	8	5	2	2	17
TAUNTON	8	5	2	2	17
SOUTH HADLEY	8	5	2	0	15
READING	6	5	0	2	13
SHREWSBURY	6	5	2	0	13
WAKEFIELD	6	5	2	0	13
BRAINTREE	6	3	1	2	12
CHICOPEE	8	0	2	2	12
NORWOOD	6	5	1	0	12
WESTFIELD*	8	3	0	0	11
PRINCETON	8	0	2	0	10
ROWLEY	6	3	0	0	9
WELLESLEY	4	3	0	2	9
MANSFIELD	6	0	0	2	8
N. ATTLEBOROUGH	2	5	1	0	8
PEABODY	6	0	2	0	8

TABLE 11

MLP SCORES IN TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

MUNICIPAL UTILITY	ACCESSIBILITY OF GOVERNING INFORMATION	OPPORTUNITIES TO AFFECT DECISION MAKING	INFORMATION SHARING	BONUS	TRANSPARENCY SCORE	
	8 PTS	5 PTS	2 PTS	8 PTS	15 PTS	
STERLING	4	0	2	2	8	
ASHBURNHAM	4	0	2	0	6	
GROVELAND	4	0	2	0	6	
MIDDLETON*	4	0	0	2	6	
CHESTER	4	0	1	0	5	
MARBLEHEAD	0	3	2	0	5	
PAXTON	0	3	2	0	5	
DANVERS*	4	0	0	0	4	
GROTON	2	0	2	0	4	
HINGHAM*	2	0	0	2	4	
HOLDEN	2	0	2	0	4	
HULL	2	0	2	0	4	
LITTLETON*	4	0	0	0	4	
TEMPLETON	2	0	2	0	4	
BOYLSTON	0	0	2	0	2	
GEORGETOWN*	2	0	0	0	2	
HUDSON*	2	0	0	0	2	
MERRIMAC*	2	0	0	0	2	
RUSSELL	0	0	2	0	2	
GOSNOLD	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	

* indicates MLPs that did not submit questionnaires or provide feedback to MCAN for the purpose of this report

Results and Observations

Summary of Transparency Scores

The results above provide a useful snapshot of how MLPs are performing, relative to each other, in actions that enhance transparency and community engagement. MLPs' average Transparency and Community Engagement score was 9.1 points with a median score of 8 points. Most MLPs (i.e., 24 out of 40) scored between 0 and 10 points in this category, eight scored between 10 and 15 points, and eight scored 15 points or more. Belmont, Concord, Ipswich, and West Boylston were the top four scorers in transparency and community engagement, earning 21 points each.

The overall scores in this section suggest that many MLPs need to do more to be transparent and engage their communities. The following subsections discuss the results of relevant subcategories and present important observations that enable us to better understand what actions MLPs should take to enhance transparency and involve community residents in decision making.

Accessibility of Governing and Operations Information

Findings from this section indicate that MLPs' level of transparency varied widely. While a number of MLPs readily offered information about their light board's decision-making processes and internal operations, other MLPs provided limited or no information (**Figures 13 and 14**). MLPs generally posted updated light board meeting minutes as well as light board dates and times. MLPs posted updated DPU and financial reports and provided contact information for light board members less frequently.

Opportunities to Affect Decision Making

Twenty MLPs either conducted surveys that included questions about renewable energy or held forums on renewable energy (or both) between 2017 and 2021. Of those 20, 12 MLPs showed clear evidence that input from community engagement directly and substantially affected MLP policy. Three of the remaining MLPs held an event or conducted a survey before 2017; 11 MLPs were recorded as having never conducted a survey

or held a forum on renewable energy; and seven did not report results and provided no evidence of either type of community engagement taking place.

70 Increasing Percentage from Non-Carbon Emitting Sources (The Town of Concord, n.d.), <https://concordma.gov/515/Power-Supply-Portfolio>

Transparency on Clean Energy and REC Retirement

Based on MCAN’s criteria, Concord was the only MLP that provided sufficient information about their REC retirement strategy to gain full points in the Bonus section. Specifically, they represented the percentage of clean energy in their energy mix in accordance with the number and types of RECs that were retired.⁷⁰

While no other MLP received full bonus points in this category, Belmont, Ipswich, and West Boylston gained almost full points by including information about REC retirement that specifically related to their energy mix and REC retirement strategy. Twelve other MLPs listed their power supply but did not disclose how the information was influenced by REC retirement and their energy mix. Twenty-five MLPs did not post their power supply on their website in a readily accessible manner (**Figure 15**).

FIGURE 13 ACCESSIBILITY OF GOVERNING INFORMATION POINTS RECEIVED

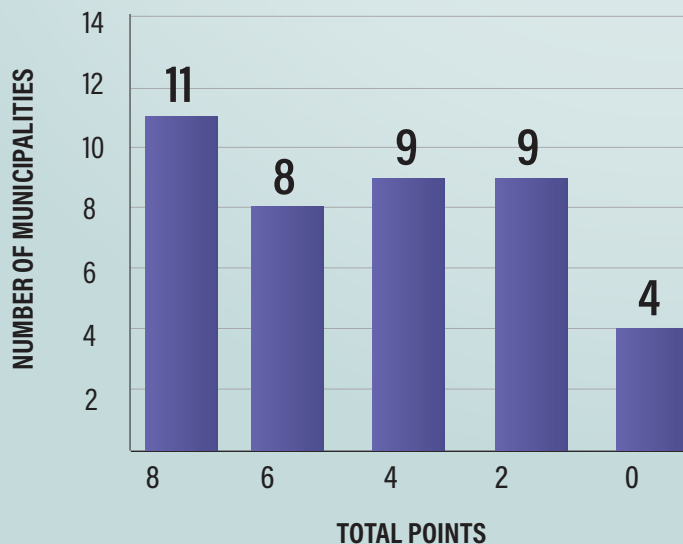


FIGURE 14 GOVERNING AND OPERATIONS INFORMATION AVAILABLE

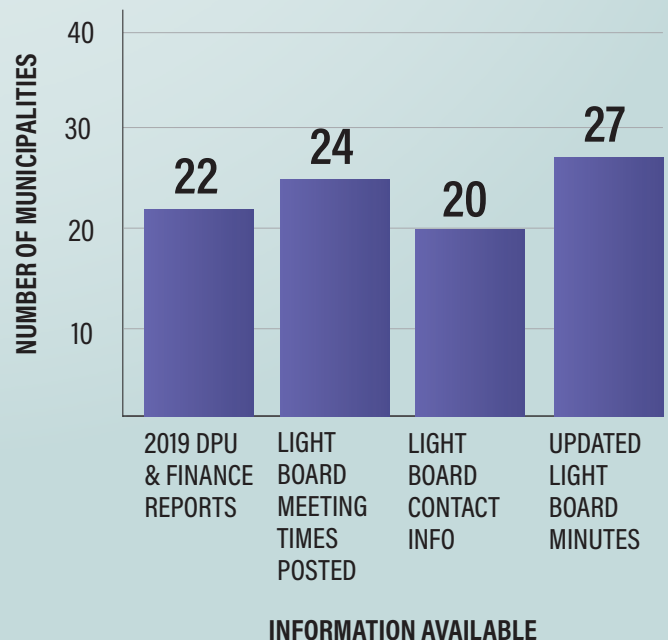
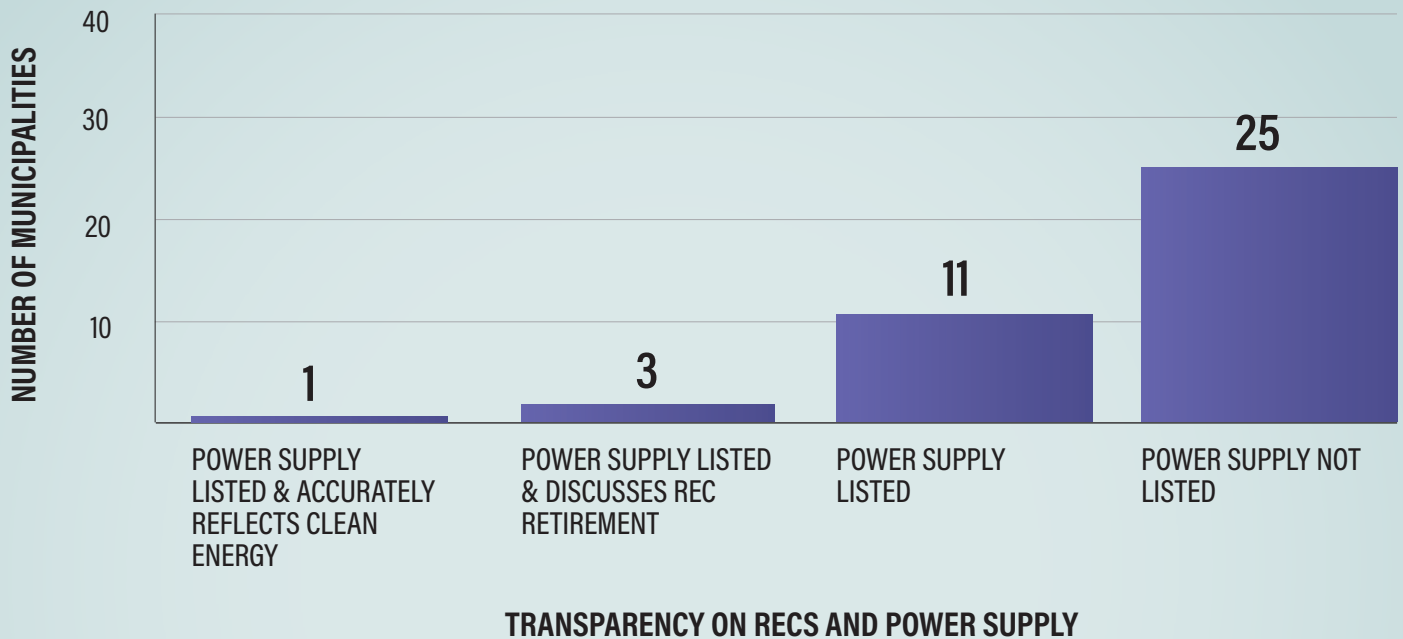


FIGURE 15**TRANSPARENCY ON CLEAN ENERGY & REC RETIREMENT**

MCAN's Recommendations for Transparency and Community Engagement

MCAN recommends that light board members, MLP staff, MLP associations, state officials, and advocates consider taking the following steps to enhance transparency and community engagement in MLP districts:

- 1 Ensure that MLPs' websites contain updated information for residents to engage in decision making**
 - ▶ Consistently post and update light board meeting times, meeting minutes, and contact information

- ▶ Make it standard practice to post policies, reports, and other operations-related information on websites
- ▶ Work towards increasing transparency and educating residents about MLPs' decision-making processes and internal operations

Providing easy-to-find information about decision-making processes and operations is fundamental to an MLP fulfilling its mission as a public, democratic institution. While MCAN recognizes that there are alternative means of disseminating this information to residents, posting information on an MLP's website is standard practice to maintain transparency and enhance community engagement. To ensure that MLPs are being fully transparent, they should post all information relevant to decision-making processes and MLP operations to their websites. These materials should include, but not be limited to, light board meeting times; updated light board meeting minutes; light board member contact information; and all relevant reports, policies, and guiding principles.

In addition to ensuring that information is available to residents online, MCAN recommends that MLPs develop strategies to reach more residents using other technologies. Examples include video-recording meetings and posting those recordings in publicly accessible locations. Such practices became widespread due to COVID-19 and should be continued and enhanced during and after the recovery.

2 Increase opportunities for community involvement in decision making

- ▶ Conduct surveys and community forums regularly on issues related to MLP policy and long-term strategies
- ▶ Solicit feedback and support from community members on proposed energy projects and long-term policies
- ▶ Develop clear protocols and procedures to substantively incorporate community input into MLPs' policies and strategies

To understand the priorities, needs, and desires of district residents, MCAN recommends that MLPs regularly solicit formal feedback from their customers. This input can be collected through surveys as well

as community forums on specific policy questions or issues. While renewable energy and energy efficiency programs must be addressed, community input can be invaluable on a variety of topics.

Contracting for energy and investments in energy projects are two specific areas in which MLPs can expand community involvement. MCAN observed multiple instances where, without the knowledge of engaged residents, MLPs signed contracts for energy or invested in energy projects that did not align with the general goals and objectives of their community. Residents have voiced their concerns following the signage of such contracts, but MLPs have been limited in their ability to respond to such input due to the legally binding nature of these contracts. The alignment between residents' preferences and MLPs' financial commitments can be strengthened through consistent community feedback on potential investments and projects prior to contract signing.

As associations dedicated to supporting MLPs in serving the needs and interests of their residents, **MMWEC and ENE can exhibit leadership by being more transparent about the projects that they are presenting to member MLPs.** Furthermore, to minimize community backlash, MMWEC and ENE can use their expertise and resources to host community forums dedicated to reviewing project proposals before these proposals are scheduled to go before light boards. Using community forums – coupled with ongoing updates from individual MLPs through their websites, newsletters, and social media – is highly consistent with MLPs' responsibility to serve the public and create an informed civic culture.

- 3 Be transparent about clean energy and REC retirement**
- ▶ Post updated power supply charts on websites
 - ▶ Be transparent about REC retirement strategies and explain the implications of REC retirement for the energy mix
 - ▶ Post charts that clearly identify the percentages of energy sources based on the number of RECs retired

MLPs have a responsibility to residents to accurately represent their energy mix in a way that follows the legally accepted practice of explicitly representing the percentage of clean and non-emitting energy. To do

so, **MLPs must represent their energy mix in accordance with the RECs and EFECs they retire from given resources and not based on the power supply.** To account for variance in the percentage of Class I RECs or Class II RECs and EFECs retired in an MLP's energy mix compared to the mix in the electron power supply, MCAN encourages MLPs to develop educational materials and campaigns regarding the benefits (and, if an MLP holds this view, the downsides) of Class I RECs and REC retirement. MLPs can coordinate with local elected officials and municipal staff, educational and library institutions, and nonprofit organizations to assist in conducting outreach and disseminating print and digital materials. Overall, MCAN strongly urges MLPs to be transparent about their strategies for procuring energy and retiring RECs and EFECs.

Conclusions

MLPs are a unique and preferable type of utility because they are responsible directly to the communities they serve. By frequently soliciting input from community members and lowering barriers to community participation in decision making, MLPs are fulfilling their responsibilities as democratic, community-owned organizations and incorporating their customers' priorities into policies and long-term strategies. However, there is still work to be done.

To enhance transparency and community engagement, MLPs can make all relevant and basic information on public involvement in their decision-making processes easily accessible to residents through MLPs' websites and printed materials. Furthermore, MLPs can enhance their efforts to solicit community feedback and actively identify additional ways in which residents can engage, particularly when MLPs are considering new energy contracts or are planning to invest in energy projects. Finally, MLPs must strive to be more transparent about their REC retirement strategies and the impacts of these strategies on the percentage of MLPs' energy mix that they can accurately claim as clean or non-emitting energy.

Transparency and community engagement are vital to MLPs as democratic institutions. Establishing democratic processes in our public utilities will ensure that MLPs are developing climate solutions that

are equitable and just. Through practices that enhance transparency and engagement, MLPs emphasize perhaps their most beneficial and unique quality as a democratic, local utility.