

Regional Electricity Forum – Jan. 20, 2021

Strengthening Communities Through Energy Choices

Summary Forum Report

Engaging with Ontario communities is important for the IESO to understand emerging priorities to plan and shape regional electricity needs. On January 20, the IESO held the fourth annual Regional Electricity Forum under the theme *Strengthening Communities Through Energy Choices*. Typically held in person within separate regions, this virtual event presented the opportunity to gather together members of the five Regional Electricity Networks from across Ontario, as well as tailor discussions to address specific regional characteristics.

During this one-day event, attendees heard from a variety of speakers in the morning who provided an overview of electricity trends and issues facing the sector. The event attracted over 500 individuals with the majority of attendees representing municipalities, Indigenous communities, business and residential consumers, local associations and chambers of commerce and energy service providers as well as electricity sector organizations including local distribution companies (LDCs), transmitters and generators.

In addition to being well attended, participants were highly engaged and shared ideas. With climate change initiatives top of mind, particularly as communities work towards net-zero greenhouse gas (GHG) targets by 2050, non-wires alternatives including distributed energy resources, microgrids and electrification were the focus of many discussions on ways to manage their own needs.

Common questions and comments from the Regional Forum focussed on the following four themes:

1. Distributed energy resources (DERs):
 - Fast becoming the customer choice to address local energy priorities – i.e. energy efficiency, small renewables, storage and microgrids
 - How can communities accelerate DER strategies to enhance affordability and resilience?
 - The sector needs to work towards increased transparency and interoperability (among LDCs and the provincial grid) to fully leverage the potential of DERs to support reliability and to be considered as viable options in regional planning initiatives
 - Customers are looking for an even cleaner generation mix as communities electrify transportation and heating

2. Incentives: With incentives for energy management initiatives reduced how can we be more inclusive of adopting new technologies to meet our needs?
3. Demand side: Opportunities for behind-the-meter resources should be available to meet ongoing needs
4. Emerging resources: Discussions should continue on the potential development and deployment of new technologies including small modular reactors, hydrogen, heat pumps.

These questions and perspectives informed individual break-out discussions held among the five Regional Electricity Networks in the afternoon. The following is a summary of those discussions and the priorities that emerged.

All presentation material and recordings can be found under the Events section on [IESO Connects](#).

IESO Regional Electricity Networks – What was heard

The following section is a summary of what was heard among each of the five Network meetings as communities reflected on how the broader provincial perspectives and trends facing the electricity sector might help to inform or address local priorities.

Each Network meeting was designed to provide an update on regional and bulk planning initiatives underway followed by a panel discussion to hear how local initiatives are meeting community priorities. Break-out discussions provided an opportunity for Network members to discuss and share perspectives and priorities which will also help to inform future Network discussions.



East Regional Electricity Network

Themes that emerged from the discussions identified concerns that smaller communities are getting lost in the broader local electricity planning outlook. Participants also highlighted the importance of a robust and **reliable supply of electricity** to support healthy economic development, and expressed that they would like to see more opportunities to explore **virtual net-metering** to help them become more **self-sufficient** in meeting their energy needs. There was also an interest in the IESO's work underway to address **aging transmission assets** and would like to be kept informed on these regional and bulk planning initiatives.

Northeast Regional Electricity Network

A resounding theme from the meeting's discussions was around the unique challenges faced by communities in the northeast to maintain their population due to **outward migration**. With efforts to mitigate this, the need to ensure a **reliable and sustainable energy future** was expressed to be a key component for local planning efforts. Unlike other regions in southern parts of Ontario where there are multiple opportunities to leverage a variety of resources, communities in the northeast expressed the need for more collaboration on **growth and economic development** initiatives, including **innovative** opportunities (i.e. community net metering) to meet local energy needs. At the same time, while still aligning future development with increased energy needs and **GHG reduction** objectives.

Northwest Regional Electricity Network

With expected growth in the **mining sector**, northwest region discussions focussed on **community development** opportunities to accommodate the growing industrial needs. Access to electricity **capacity, power quality, reliability** and keeping **costs** low were key components for meeting growth. In addition, **climate change** is emerging as a priority and communities are focussed on the development of **energy plans** to help meet their goals. There was interest in exploring new, innovative technologies (i.e. hydrogen, small modular reactors, air source heat pumps) to support capacity needs in rural areas as well as **reduced reliance on diesel** operations. **Electrification** of transportation and heating is emerging as a solution to reduce GHG emissions, however, it was noted that natural gas is a fairly new resource to many small communities.

Southwest Regional Electricity Network

Attendees heard from community leaders about how they are working to shape their energy future and meet local **climate change** and **economic development** objectives, ranging from areas with very near-term needs being driven by the **agricultural sector**, to longer-term needs within **urban centres**. A key takeaway from the afternoon's discussions was the need for more **targeted dialogue** to explore these unique priorities and opportunities to address **specific needs** based on the characteristics and nature of growth and development.

GTA/Central Regional Electricity Network

Discussions highlighted **greenhouse gas reductions** as a high priority for communities, and the need to elevate actions that have a big impact on lowering emissions while also enabling **cost savings**. Other priorities raised include the importance of maintaining a **resilient, affordable** local electricity grid to support **future economic growth**, and a keen interest in seeing more consideration of how to enable **distributed energy resources** as part of the regional electricity planning process and empower communities to meet their electricity needs.

Survey Results

All those that attended received a survey to provide feedback on the meeting and how future meetings should look. Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to gather virtually. Overwhelmingly, people said that they would be very likely to attend this event again in the future. Positive comments focused around the variety of speakers and agenda topics, as well as the level of expertise and dynamic discussion that speakers brought.

Topics for future events include more discussion on DERs, cutting edge technologies in the electricity sector and opportunities to reduce community emissions. Feedback varied on the afternoon breakout discussions with some attendees enjoying the networking opportunity while others noted that more time and facilitation was needed to make the breakouts more effective.

Areas of opportunity to improve future events included the ability to provide focused feedback on topics and to look for more creative ways for attendees to network in a virtual environment.

What to expect

Feedback received in these forums is important for the IESO to shape future discussions and engagement initiatives that are currently underway to meet future electricity needs – including emerging needs as identified in the the mid to late 2020s in the recent [Annual Planning Outlook](#). In the coming months, Network members can expect to hear more about, and have opportunities to contribute to, IESO initiatives like enabling a variety of resources for the future, a roadmap on integrating distributed energy resources as well as the next steps in the development of an IESO bulk planning process.

In addition, the IESO will use what we heard to help inform future discussions in each Network region to align with local priorities.

The Networks are all about connections and the IESO is actively creating more ways to enhance and improve on those connections. Communications will continue to inform and seek input on important initiatives within each Network area.

These conversations reinforced the importance of learning from each other to address common challenges – and of continuing engagement. The IESO will build on this dialogue, online, through [IESO Connects](#), a new interactive online engagement platform for the Regional Networks.

Conclusion

Many thanks to all the speakers and attendees for their contributions for a successful forum.

All presentations and recorded meetings are available in the Events section of [IESO Connects](#).

Please email communityengagement@ieso.ca if you have any comments or ideas for future topics of discussion.