



# 1.7 MEGAWATTS and Counting...



Round Two Report  
March 2015

We are grateful to the community volunteers and partner solar installers who made Round Two a success and provided photos for this report.

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## BACKGROUND

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Solarize Upper Valley is a program of Vital Communities that teams up local communities with solar photovoltaic (PV) installers for 15 weeks of outreach aimed at making solar energy more accessible to residents, and less expensive through a tiered-pricing structure that brings the cost down as more residents sign contracts with their partner installers. Vital Communities coordinated two rounds of the program in 15 Vermont and New Hampshire towns between late 2013 and early 2015.

Solarize Upper Valley builds on other successful Solarize programs throughout New England and across the country. Our goals are to prove Solarize can be effective even in a rural setting, double the amount of residential solar energy in each of our partner communities, and spark lasting growth in the region's solar energy market beyond the Solarize timeline and communities. We are also committed to developing Solarize Upper Valley as an open-source model to be shared with grassroots groups in rural communities within and outside our region.



Solarize Upper Valley addresses key barriers to going solar<sup>1</sup>:

### **Consumer Confidence**

- Led by local volunteers and a trusted local nonprofit, Vital Communities
- Competitively selected partner installer
- Public conversation and connections with neighbors who are also considering solar

### **Complexity**

- Solarize makes the first step easy: sign up for a free site visit to learn more
- Outreach and education help residents understand what to expect

### **Cost**

- Public outreach helps installers reduce marketing costs and pass savings along to Solarize customers through a tiered pricing structure (cost goes down as more residents sign on)
- Vital Communities provides information about options for financing solar and works with local lending institutions to improve options

### **Inertia**

- The deadline spurs residents to action – they must sign a contract with their partner installer by a certain date to be eligible for the special tiered pricing offer

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<sup>1</sup> More information about how Solarize addresses key barriers is available in our [Round One Report](#).

## Solarize Upper Valley Round Two Timeline

|   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| RFPs released for communities and installers                | June/August 2014 |
| Information sessions for communities and installers         | June/July 2014   |
| Participating communities chosen                            | July 2014        |
| Partner installers chosen                                   | September 2014   |
| Launch events in each community                             | October 2014     |
| Program deadline (signed contracts must be in by this date) | January 31, 2015 |

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

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Solarize Upper Valley relies on significant support from Vital Communities staff, who are responsible for establishing program timelines, coordinating program partners, developing resources and templates, managing the Solarize Upper Valley website, and tracking data throughout the program.

Solarize Upper Valley comprises three primary components:

- 1) Selection of Solarize communities
- 2) Selection of a Solarize partner installer for each community
- 3) Community education and outreach

### 1. Selection of Communities

Vital Communities invited municipalities within its 69-town service region to submit applications for Solarize Round Two. Many municipalities chose to partner and apply jointly as a unified Solarize community to broaden the base of both volunteers and potential customers.

Eleven towns in Vermont and New Hampshire applied to participate in Round Two and we evaluated them based on several criteria, including commitment to clean energy and sustainability, experience with community outreach, capacity of the proposed volunteer team, and demonstration of creative thinking. Ten of the 11 applicants were accepted into Round Two, and they partnered to form five different Solarize campaigns.

#### Feedback from Solarize Participants

*"The program was set up to make it as easy as possible. All I had to do was send one email and the installer handled everything."*

*"I had no real previous knowledge about everything that was involved or the cost. It was great to learn it all."*

*"The process to go solar through Solarize made it very easy. The pricing and financing were very attractive."*

## 2. Selection of Installers

Vital Communities issued an RFP by email to solar PV installers operating in the Upper Valley, in addition to posting it online and hosting an informational workshop for installers. A detailed profile of each Solarize community supplemented the RFP. Multiple installers were permitted to join together and bid as a consortium.

Each installer proposal included three sections:

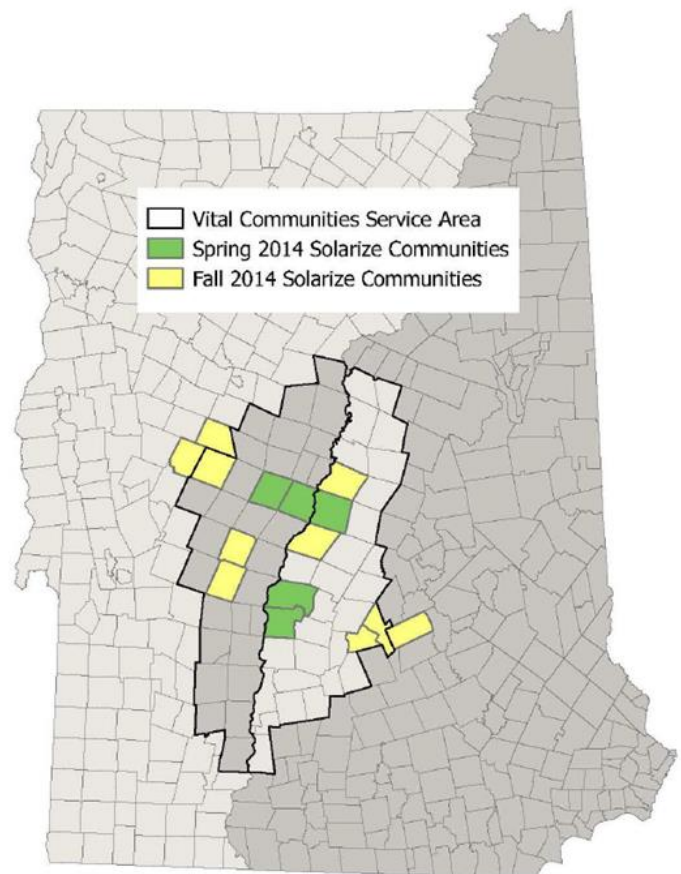
- 1) General information about the company's experience and program implementation plan
- 2) Customized plan to address issues specific to the Solarize community
- 3) Equipment and pricing proposal, including a tiered-pricing schedule and a list of cost adders

Each Solarize community's installer selection team evaluated bids and selected their partner installer with support from Vital Communities and an independent technical consultant. Selection committees interviewed their top two installer candidates, checked customer references, and conducted additional background research as needed. Eight installers responded to the Round Two RFP, and each Solarize community received two to four bids. Bids were evaluated on quality and value, experience, implementation plan, pricing structure, demonstration of innovative concepts, marketing plan, and overall fit with the community.

Our five Solarize Round Two communities and partner installers included:

- Pomfret and Woodstock, Vermont – Catamount Solar & Integrity Energy (a consortium)
- Randolph, Brookfield, and Braintree, Vermont – Catamount Solar & Integrity Energy (a consortium)
- Hanover, New Hampshire – Energy Emporium
- Orford, New Hampshire – Milhouse Enterprises
- Andover, New London, and Wilmot, New Hampshire – ReVision Energy

Details about Round One communities and installers are available in the [Round One Report](#).



### 3. Outreach and Education

Successful Solarize campaigns rely on effective community outreach. In Round Two, key components of outreach included Solarize community launch events, open houses at solar homes, community email discussion lists, tabling at events, and direct outreach to community members who signed up for Solarize updates. Volunteers also hung posters and banners, included information in school newsletters, sent targeted mailings to residents, and built “progress meters” for public display.

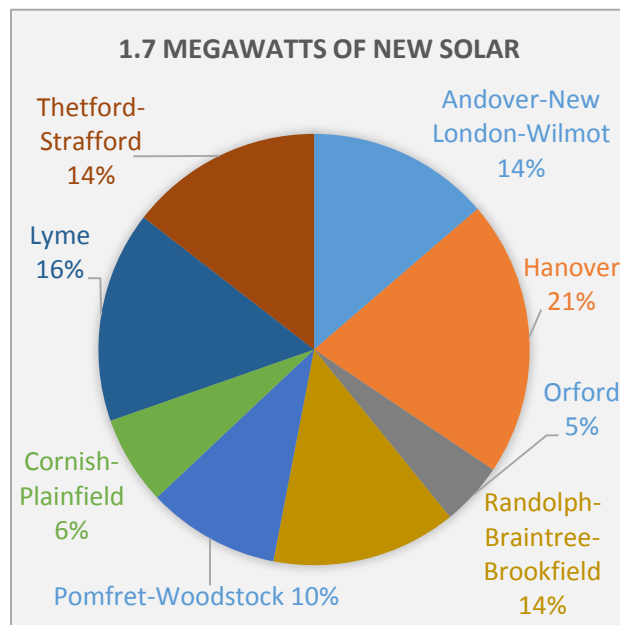
Volunteers’ efforts, combined with Vital Communities’ own outreach, generated significant buzz in the media. Round Two generated more than 150 pieces of media coverage from 55 sources, including stories on New Hampshire Public Radio, regional television and radio stations, town and installer websites, Facebook pages, and local, regional, and statewide newspapers.

#### Tracking Progress

Throughout the 15-week outreach campaigns, Vital Communities received reports at least biweekly from Solarize partner installers detailing the status of program leads (residents who had requested a site visit). We shared this information with community volunteers to inform their outreach efforts. Vital Communities also hosted biweekly check-in calls with volunteers and their installer partners. After the program deadline, Vital Communities surveyed all program participants, even people who got a site visit but didn’t go solar.

## RESULTS

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Although some communities hoped for higher numbers of signed contracts, every Solarize Round Two community met or exceeded its goal of doubling the pre-Solarize baseline of residential solar PV installations.

Including the results of Round One, Solarize Upper Valley has spurred **301 homeowners** to sign contracts to go solar with their communities’ Solarize partner installers, adding **1.7 megawatts** of renewable energy to the region. We are also aware of dozens of homeowners in our partner communities who were inspired by Solarize to go solar with a non-Solarize installer.

## Solarize Upper Valley Results Summary | Rounds One and Two

|                               | Site Visit Sign-Ups |            | Contracts  |           | % Contracts Signed Week of Deadline** | New Solar<br>kW | Carbon Impact Equivalents |                      |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------|------------|-----------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
|                               | #                   | % of HHDs* | #          | % of HHDs |                                       |                 | Metric<br>Tons CO2        | Cars off<br>the road |
| Andover-New London-Wilmot     | 193                 | 6%         | 38         | 1%        | 50%                                   | 236             | 204                       | 43                   |
| Hanover                       | 273                 | 9%         | 62         | 2%        | 63%                                   | 357             | 308                       | 65                   |
| Orford                        | 67                  | 13%        | 14         | 3%        | 21%                                   | 82              | 70                        | 15                   |
| Randolph-Brookfield-Braintree | 171                 | 6%         | 41         | 1%        | 39%                                   | 239             | 206                       | 43                   |
| Pomfret-Woodstock             | 104                 | 6%         | 26         | 1%        | 62%                                   | 172             | 148                       | 31                   |
| <b>ROUND TWO</b>              | <b>808</b>          | <b>7%</b>  | <b>181</b> | <b>2%</b> | <b>51%</b>                            | <b>1086</b>     | <b>936</b>                | <b>197</b>           |
| Cornish-Plainfield            | 152                 | 10%        | 23         | 1%        | 22%                                   | 115             | 99                        | 21                   |
| Lyme                          | 125                 | 18%        | 51         | 7%        | 45%                                   | 273             | 236                       | 50                   |
| Thetford-Strafford            | 155                 | 10%        | 46         | 3%        | 46%                                   | 250             | 216                       | 45                   |
| <b>ROUND ONE</b>              | <b>432</b>          | <b>11%</b> | <b>120</b> | <b>3%</b> | <b>41%</b>                            | <b>638</b>      | <b>550</b>                | <b>116</b>           |
| <b>Both Rounds Combined</b>   | <b>1240</b>         | <b>8%</b>  | <b>301</b> | <b>2%</b> | <b>47%</b>                            | <b>1724</b>     | <b>1487</b>               | <b>313</b>           |

\*HHDs = Total number of households according to the 2010 US Census.

\*\*Pomfret-Woodstock and Randolph-Brookfield-Braintree had two deadlines (Dec. 31 when the VT rebate went away, and January 31 when Solarize ended).

Three of the five Round Two communities had enough participation to reach their lowest pricing tiers, and homeowners in all communities saved between 15 and 40 cents per watt off the base price at the beginning of the program. The average actual cost (including adders<sup>2</sup>) across all Round Two communities was \$4.01, compared to \$3.78 per watt during Round One. This price shift was due, in part, to new National Electrical Code (NEC) regulations implemented in 2015 that increased installers' expenses. However, Round Two pricing remains lower than the 2014 Vermont average of \$4.32 per watt. The New Hampshire average for the first half of fiscal year 2015 was \$3.75.

While we are aware of only 16 homeowners who financed Solarize contracts during Round Two, Solarize has helped increase and improve options for financing residential solar installations locally. During Round One, Mascoma Savings Bank created a discounted home equity loan specifically available to homeowners in Solarize communities; for Round Two, Mascoma not only increased the available loan amount, but also made it available to local homeowners outside Solarize communities.

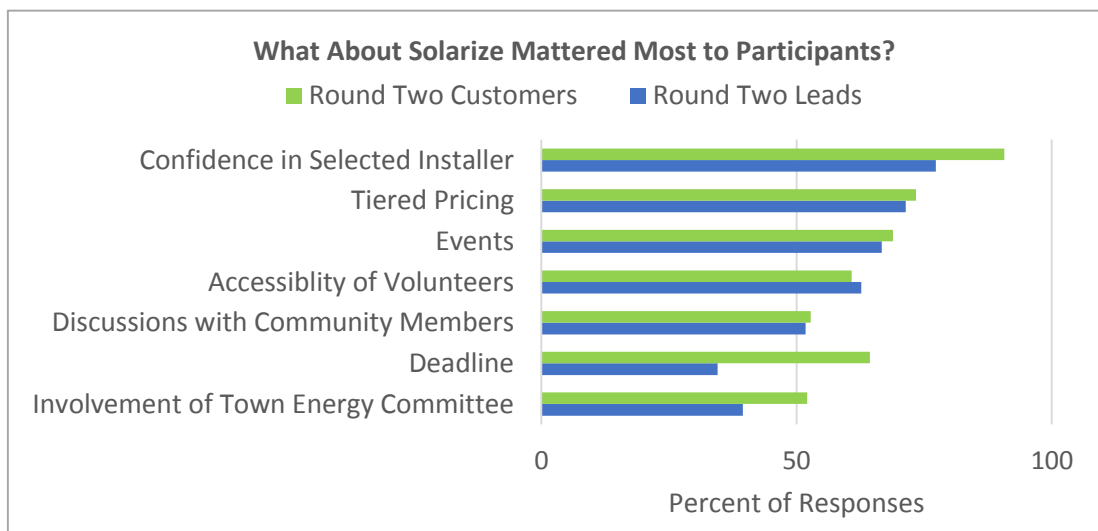
<sup>2</sup> Partner installers were required to list all equipment and services included in their base price, as well as all "cost adders" for any additional features and services that might be required/requested on a case-by-case basis.

As in Round One, each Round Two campaign’s launch event and deadline were critical. Of Round Two customers, 49 percent attended their community’s launch event, and 51 percent signed their contracts during the last week before the deadline, compared to 41 percent in Round One. As the chart below demonstrates, the majority of site visit requests were received during the first weeks of the program, while most contracts were signed at the very end.



So who are these people who went solar in Round Two? All of them own their own home and 75 percent are over the age of 50. More importantly, 62 percent say that prior to Solarize they had never considered solar, didn’t think it was realistic, or figured they would do it eventually. According to our survey, these people talked to each other about their decision, and more than half encouraged a friend to get a site visit, too. In the end, 37 percent needed to have extra work done in order to go solar, typically tree removal or roof replacement/reinforcement.

Of people who had a site visit but chose not to go solar, the top reasons for not moving forward were 1) cost (~35 percent), 2) poor site (~35 percent), and 3) timing (~20 percent). One in three say they are likely to install solar in the future, while another 39 percent say there is “some chance” of installing solar later on.





## LESSONS LEARNED

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**The installer selection process is critical.** During Round Two, some communities were challenged by the small number of bids they received and the tight timeline for making a selection. Solarize volunteers take the selection process seriously, because the partner installer is a crucial component of the Solarize program to most participants. We recommend allowing at least four to six weeks between installer interviews and any program launch event. We have also added several new components to the RFP for installers, including questions related to the installer's insurance policies and the use of subcontractors, to help ensure volunteers have the information they need to feel comfortable with their final selection. Our sample RFP is available by request and will soon be available for download online.

**Volunteers need frequent updates from partner installers.** Particularly during the final weeks of the program, it is helpful for community volunteers to have at least weekly updates from their partner installers to understand their campaign's progress, any challenges the installers face, the needs of potential customers, and how the volunteer team can best support their campaign's success. For example, based on feedback from a partner installer, a volunteer team might choose to hold a phone-a-thon to reach out to existing leads rather than host a public meeting for new leads.

**Partnering communities need active volunteers from each town.** In rural areas, there are significant benefits to towns partnering with one another on a unified Solarize campaign – there are more residents to market the program to and more volunteers to shoulder the work of the program. This works best if volunteers from every partner town actively participate in the outreach and behind-the-scenes tasks that make the program successful.

**Marketing costs should be considered.** While Solarize is intended to be a low-cost, grassroots program, some Solarize communities choose to spend significant sums on paid advertising, targeted mailings, and other program promotion. This should be considered early on and discussed with potential partner installers during the installer selection process. Some installers are willing to help pay for campaign marketing, but it should be part of the conversation from the start.

**Timing is everything.** Round Two spanned October 2014 through January 2015. Although Solarize programs in Southern New England claim the winter holiday season hasn't negatively impacted their campaigns, our Round Two communities found the holidays problematic. Volunteers had difficulty putting personal time into the program, and activity among residents slowed down significantly. Volunteers unanimously felt the holidays interrupted the momentum of their campaigns and resulted in fewer solar homes. We recommend launching Solarize campaigns in early spring or early summer.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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More information about Solarize Upper Valley can be found online: [VitalCommunities.org/Solarize](https://VitalCommunities.org/Solarize)

**Solarize Upper Valley is proud to be an open-source program.** Anything developed by Vital Communities for Solarize Upper Valley, including RFPs, event and outreach checklists, tracking templates, outreach materials, survey results, and more, is available either online or by request.

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**More about Vital Communities**

Vital Communities is a nonprofit organization working in the Upper Valley region of Vermont and New Hampshire to bring citizens, organizations, and municipalities together to take on issues where an independent voice and regional approach are essential. Solarize Upper Valley is a project of the Vital Communities Energy Program, which works to move the Upper Valley toward energy independence by catalyzing local efforts in energy efficiency and renewable energy. Vital Communities provided program coordination and outreach/marketing support throughout Rounds One and Two of Solarize Upper Valley. More information is available at [VitalCommunities.org](https://VitalCommunities.org).