

Final Report on the Public Engagement Process  
related to the

VELCO 2009 Long Range Transmission Plan  
– Public Review Draft

The Snelling Center for Government  
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During the months of January through May 2009, the Snelling Center for Government worked in tandem with and on behalf of VELCO (Vermont Electric Power Company) to create and implement a robust public engagement process associated with the Long Range Transmission Plan (LRTP)—Public Review Draft. The Snelling Center utilized its staff expertise, its network of alumni from the Vermont Leadership Institute, and extensive community partners and contacts to implement a multi-pronged strategy to inform and engage stakeholders and individuals throughout the state.

The process was designed to ensure adherence to the mandate contained in MOU in Docket 7081 for public engagement and the core principles outlined to effectively and meaningfully engage the public. From the start, the VELCO/SCG planning team recognized that central to the success of the process was to be clear with the public about the opportunities available to the public to inform decision-making, what level of involvement was being offered and how the input would be used in decision-making. Equally important was the need to share information with the public about the mandate under which VELCO operates and the factors which must be considered in the planning process. Setting the parameters and boundaries of the decision-making was essential.

***Purposes:***

The purpose of the public outreach was three-fold. First and foremost, it was to share the 2009 Long Range Transmission Plan (LRTP)—Public Review Draft and information regarding factors pertinent to the decision-making process, as well as the opportunities and latitude available to the public to influence decision-making. The second purpose was to obtain input on the analysis contained in the draft plan from numerous demographically and geographically diverse stakeholders. Third, was to establish a strong foundation for future public input and engagement when the time comes to address individual reliability issues identified in the analysis. Towards this end, it was essential to demonstrate VELCO's transparency, integrity and responsiveness to public input throughout the process.

***Desired outcomes:***

In the initial meeting of the combined VELCO/Snelling Center planning team, we identified the following outcomes as measures of success:

- Increase community understanding of the analysis, potential solutions and opportunities to influence selected solutions.
- Understand community questions and concerns related to deficiencies and potential solutions.
- Identify planning or activities in the region that may influence the electricity transmission, projected peak load, and/or acceptable solutions
- Identify individuals interested in participating in future community-specific discussions in areas to determine solutions to identified reliability deficiency
- Foster trust and participation in VELCO's planning process.

The following is a summary of the work conducted by the Snelling Center, the materials developed, the media coverage generated, and the evaluations by participants in the outreach sessions. The summary will end with a discussion of the extent to which the

desired outcomes were achieved through the engagement process and key items for consideration in planning future public engagement efforts.

## **Methods**

The Snelling Center employed three basic methods for engaging the public; each offering a different level of involvement. Individuals were informed about the release of the draft LTRP through the media (traditional and electronic), offered the opportunity to review the information and respond on-line, and invited to attend one of the six statewide forums to meet with VELCO and distribution utility staff.

The process was designed and continuously refined in collaboration with the VELCO staff team. Additionally, the Snelling Center conducted a series of interviews with key regional leaders. These regional advisors were essential in gaining an understanding of community resources and opportunities, community dynamics and regional concerns. They were also quite helpful in informing their professional networks, promoting the engagement opportunities, and ensuring the transparency and inclusivity of the engagement process.

## **Key Target Audiences, Promotion, and Media**

### **Target audiences**

The Snelling Center worked with VELCO to develop a contact list of the key target audiences as mandated by the MOU. This served as the primary list for public education and communications regarding the public meetings. Additionally, The Snelling Center utilized its strong working relationships with state legislators, Regional Development Corporations, Regional Planning Commissions and our network of alumni from the Vermont Leadership Institute, to connect with the key stakeholders within the regions targeted for public engagement activities.

The initial list of target audiences for the public meetings included the following:

- Local and regional planners
- Utility and environmental regulators
- Local governments
- Efficiency Vermont
- Geo-targeted areas (for energy efficiency services)
- Environmental groups
- Renewable energy developers
- Business and industry trade groups
- Economic development groups (regional development corps, chambers of commerce)
- Local energy committees
- Legislators
- General public
- Audiences specifically named in 30 V.S.A. § 218c: “the public service board, the department of public service, any entity appointed by the public service board pursuant to subdivision 209(d)(2) of this title, the agency of natural resources, the

division for historic preservation, the department of health, the scenery preservation council, the agency of transportation, the attorney general, the chair of each regional planning commission, each retail electricity provider within the state, and any public interest group that requests, or has made a standing request for, a notice [of public hearings on the LRTP].”

A full list of the individuals and entities contacted throughout the promotion process can be found in Appendix A.

### **Promotion**

The Snelling Center employed both state and regional strategies to promote the opportunity to attend a public session and/or comment on the draft LRTP on line. An initial statewide mailing was sent to 476 people via email and 1,383 people via regular mail. In addition, a request was sent to numerous statewide networks including VECAN, VAPDA, VPIC, and government agencies to utilize their organizational communications channels (website, e-distribution lists, newsletters) to publicize the LRTP and the opportunity to attend a public session and/or offer comment on-line. A full list of organizations and networks sent information to assist with promotion is in Appendix A.

Similarly, regional outreach was assisted by regional advisors and partners who used their organizational publications and distribution lists to further promote the release of the LRTP and the opportunity for public engagement. These regional partners (Regional Development Corporations, Regional Planning Commissions and energy committees) were helpful in ensuring that key stakeholders, including individuals connected to local planning, local chambers of commerce, active citizen’s groups and energy committees received the information. In addition to offering their communications networks, they offered their credibility. This should not be undervalued.

A geo-targeted reminder was sent three days in advance of each regional session to the Regional Development Corporations, Regional Planning Commissions, Alumni of the Vermont Leadership Institute and surrounding local energy committees.

### **Media Outreach**

Through the leadership of Maria Basescu, the Snelling Center designed and managed media outreach related to the public engagement opportunities to ensure that the general public was aware of the Long Range Transmission Plan – Public Review Draft and the variety of opportunities to become informed and engaged in the public process.

To begin, the Snelling Center outlined critical communications principles and timing to align announcement and distribution of public engagement materials with VELCO’s completion of the LRTP. Subsequently, Maria developed and managed the placement of press releases, public notices, and promotional materials related to the public engagement opportunities. Maria persistently pursued key reporters in each of the state’s major media outlets, including newspapers, radio and TV to encourage articles both in advance of and

subsequent to each of the six sessions. An outline of the media plan, the media contact list, advertising and placement schedule, plus the full list and copies of coverage can be found in Appendix B.

### **On-Line Engagement**

#### ***Structure/Design:***

The Snelling Center investigated interactive digital tools for obtaining public input and responding to questions about the LRTP. Two recent examples explored were the web tools used by the Department of Public Service for their public engagement process on energy planning and by the CCMPO in transportation planning. Based on the results of research, refinement of the understanding of the level of public input warranted at this stage of the planning process, and security concerns related to the display of localized data, Snelling recommended that limited interactivity be part of the digital strategy. Snelling developed recommendations and a template for the design and use of a project-specific website to provide an easy portal for members of the public interested in learning more about the LRTP to review information and offer comment. The web format also enabled detailed usage tracking through Google analytics, an invaluable tool in measuring the impact of various promotional efforts. During the public outreach period, Google Analytics shows that there were 1,954 page views.

### **Public Forums**

#### ***Location and Attendance:***

Six statewide forums were held with a total of 84 participants. The locations were determined in consultation with VELCO and based on a desire to ensure broad statewide coverage. Additionally, the location of identified reliability deficiencies and the presence of active local energy committees were considered in selecting the location. It should be noted that the original plan did not include Rutland but this sixth session was added as it represented a critical region given existing relationships and potential future projects.

The location, dates and attendance at the sessions were as follows:

Monday, April 27, 2009 at 5:30 pm Holiday Inn, Rutland	18 participants
Wednesday, April 29, 2009 at 5:30 pm Lake Morey Resort, Fairlee	4 participants
Tuesday, May 5, 2009 at 5:30 pm Sheraton Hotel, Burlington	15 participants
Thursday, May 7, 2009 at 5:30 pm Catamount Arts Center, St. Johnsbury	15 participants

Wednesday, May 13, 2009 at 5:30 pm      13 participants  
Marlboro Tech Center, Brattleboro

Monday, May 18, 2009 at 1:30 pm      19 participants  
VT College of Fine Arts, Montpelier

***Structure/Design:***

The public was invited to meet with VELCO staff, members of local distribution utilities and the Department of Public Service in a three-part session:

Part I: A senior officer with VELCO provided the initial welcome and outlined the new process by which VELCO is seeking early engagement of the public and ensuring “full, fair and timely consideration” of transmission alternatives. The welcome was followed by a presentation by Dean LaForest of intent of the plan, the requirements under which VELCO is operating, the forecasting methodology and the initial findings. Snelling Center staff then outlined the flow of the session, the content of the kiosks and the various ways (discussion, comment card and computer station) for participants to record their concerns and information they wanted to share with the VELCO planners about local events, plans or issues. A copy of the opening remarks and the power point used by Dean LaForest can be found in Appendix D. It should be noted that the first two sessions did not include the formal presentation. This was added based on the evaluation of these early sessions and the comments by participants that additional “education” would be helpful. The presentation received high ratings from participants.

Part II: Participants moved at their own pace through a series of information kiosks to learn more about the content of the LTRP. Kiosks displayed key aspects of the plan, information about factors pertinent to decision-making, and initial screening of the viability of non-transmission alternatives. Members of the VELCO technical staff and representatives from the distribution utilities (primarily CVPS and GMP) and from the Department of Public Service were assigned to each kiosk to answer questions and concerns about the information presented. A list of the kiosks, the types of information at each, and the supporting posters can be found in Appendix D.

Part III: After reviewing the information at the kiosks, participants were invited to join small roundtable discussions with trained facilitators who used prepared questions to solicit feedback from public participants. The intent of the discussion was to identify impressions, concerns, and opportunities to improve the plan, as well as learn more about local activities and plans that might influence future electricity and transmission demand. All comments and questions were audio recorded for inclusion in the documentation of the public input process and for incorporation into the plan to be submitted to the Public Service Board on July 1, 2009. A copy of the discussion guide and materials used to train the facilitators can be found in Appendix F.

All participants were offered three ways to record their concerns and questions: by written comment on printed forms, through audio recorded interviews, and on-line at computers in the session room. Participants were also encouraged to complete session evaluations.

All registered participants with e-mail addresses were sent a follow up note the day after the session thanking them for their participation and directing them to links to provide comment on the draft plan and evaluate the outreach session.

The list of registered participants is included in Appendix D and will be submitted electronically to VELCO for further communications about the planning process and specific projects.

## **Measures of Success and Evaluation**

### **Outreach Overall**

A formal debrief with the VELCO team is scheduled on June 4<sup>th</sup> to discuss the success of the public process. It is our recommendation that the team consider the initial goals for the public process in evaluating the level of effort and results:

- Increase community understanding of the analysis, potential solutions and opportunities to influence selected solutions.
- Understand community questions and concerns related to deficiencies and potential solutions.
- Identify planning or activities in the region that may influence the electricity transmission, projected peak load and/or acceptable solutions
- Identify individuals interested in participating in future community-specific discussions in areas to determine solutions to identified reliability deficiency.
- Foster trust and participation in the planning process.

Following are some initial thoughts offered by the participants at the public sessions and then by the Snelling Center team on the various aspects of the effort.

### **Participant Evaluation of the Public Sessions**

As mentioned above, a written evaluation was given to each of the participants at the public sessions and a follow up email was sent the day after the session to encourage participants to take advantage of the additional on-line opportunities for comment and feedback.

Of the 84 participants in the public sessions, 18 participants completed the evaluation. . The full set of data can be found in Appendix E. Following are the highlights of the evaluation:

Rating of the overall experience:	61% good, 33% excellent
Quality of the information kiosks:	50% good, 44% excellent
Quality of the small group discussions:	36% good, 27 % excellent
Quality of the handouts:	53% good, 33% excellent
Useful information:	55.6% agree, 38.9% strongly agree
Adequate access to knowledgeable staff:	41.2% agree, 58.8% strongly agree
Ample opportunity for public comment:	75.0% agree, 25.0% strongly agree

Some of the comments collected include:

The presenters were great at explaining things

I really needed more time to make the rounds and visits all the kiosks. A lot in the draft report and the speakers could have spent more time explaining need/benefit anticipated for the different projects

I did not learn very much. Also, I received the draft plan only the day before the meeting. I did not have time to review it beforehand and did not feel I could ask intelligent questions without reading it first.

Thank you for holding a public session in Rutland

I liked the fact VELCO had reps here from PSD and CVPS to address their interface with transmission issues

I will utilize the website for further comment on the record after additional review of tonight's documents presented

(A) great opportunity to learn about an important topic from knowledgeable people.  
Thank you

Good presentation

Thanks for coming to St Johnsbury

I was disappointed in the small turn-out. Most people involved in a transmission project complain about its impacts but the need is compelling and the people explaining the process were very knowledgeable.

It is good for VELCO to engage in this public outreach. Unfortunately, the public will not get truly involved until there is a specific project that will affect them directly.

### **Snelling Center Notes on the Process and Ideas for Future Efforts**

From the beginning, the VELCO/Snelling team recognized the challenge presented by the requirement for early and meaningful public engagement given the current stage in the

planning process. At this point, the “plan” is actually a report on an analysis and the opportunities and latitude available to the public to influence decision-making are limited. As such, the design of the public outreach and engagement was predicated on the balance of 80% information sharing and 20% input from the public. One of the initial challenges was to identify and articulate what input the public could offer that would be useful to and/or influence the content of the plan. This posed a challenge for some of the public session participants as well who expressed concern about their ability to offer comment given their lack of technical knowledge. In the latter public sessions the presenters and moderator stressed the importance of local knowledge. This was an important adjustment during the process and should be kept in mind for future outreach efforts.

The second challenge the team wrestled with was how to make transmission reliability planning interesting and relevant to the public. Translating the technical document into the “public review” draft of the LTRP was an important step. In the future, an even more accessible laypersons’ document and additional marketing materials aimed at articulating the relevancy of transmission planning would be good companion documents. For example, we initially proposed the creation of an interactive map which would have enabled individuals to search results “how it might impact me” based on location. Unfortunately, due to security concerns, this map was not created.

### ***What Went Well***

Promotion: We heard many participants comment on receiving multiple announcements of the sessions. We know that many RDCs, RPCS, energy committees and VECAN sponsors posted the events on their calendars and included the press release in their newsletters.

Media: The LTRP and outreach received excellent coverage with articles in advance and after the sessions, television coverage in Burlington and St. Johnsbury, and radio coverage in Brattleboro.

Design/Format: The overall design and timing of the sessions seemed to work; the addition of a formal presentation and description of the information at each kiosk to the opening was helpful continual refinement.

Information/Materials: VELCO provided the highest quality information and graphical displays; members of the staff from VELCO, the distribution utilities and the Department of Public Service were all knowledgeable and skilled in interacting with and responding to public questions and comments.

Other: Inclusion of staff from distribution utilities and the Department of Public Service was a great asset.

### ***What Could be Improved***

Promotion:

- Add enticing language regarding how electric transmission and transmission planning relate to issues the public understands or cares about (e.g. keeping the lights on; maintaining internet connection; broader energy supply decisions)
- Specify the type of information that the public would have that could inform the plan and/or influence decisions

Media:

- Continue to seek pre-session features that help to contextualize the planning process and opportunities for public engagement
- Obtain earlier approval to enable distribution of a “letter to the editor”

Design/Format:

- Continue unified training or brief preparatory process in advance for facilitators and staff assigned to kiosks, including talking points, the purpose of the forums, principles of engagement with the public, etc.
- Address the issue of how to get people to read the plan in advance, "do their homework", if that is the expectation or desired step. An executive summary of the plan might enable this. A more directive request in the advanced materials could also help.

Information/Materials:

- Continue to consider how to translate technical information into lay language and relate to public concerns and practices
- Continue to specify the type of information that the public may have that would be useful to planners—include this in all promotional materials
- Consider offering additional clarity about the Public Service Board's role in planning
- Clearly articulate VELCO's awareness of the importance of future technologies (e.g. Smart Grid) and other potential influences on forecasting, and speak to the good reasons these were NOT officially included in the draft plan at this stage.

Other:

- Better utilize VLI graduates and local leaders in planning and personal invites

It is hard to evaluate how widespread the impact was as it is clear that only a small portion of those who were reached through the promotional efforts and media attention chose to participate in one of the public sessions. However, given the media coverage, the quality of the process and materials, and the thoughtful feedback of the participants, the Snelling Center team believes the process was effective overall in meeting the first four of the intended goals:

- Increase community understanding of the analysis, potential solutions and opportunities to influence selected solutions.
- Understand community questions and concerns related to deficiencies and potential solutions.

- Identify planning or activities in the region that may influence the electricity transmission, projected peak load and/or acceptable solutions
- Identify individuals interested in participating in future community-specific discussions in areas to determine solutions to identified reliability deficiency.
- Foster trust and participation in the planning process.

Time and turn out in future VELCO sponsored sessions will be useful in gauging the degree to which this process has fostered trust and participation in future elements of the planning process.

## **Appendices**

### **A. Promotion Plan and Materials**

- VELCO Recruitment/Invitation Plan Schedule
- Calls to Key Leaders
- Networks for Promotion/Recruitment (via newsletters, electronic distribution lists, website calendars, etc.)
- Promotional Language Options
- List of Individuals Invited
- Postcard invitations

### **B. Media Plan, Materials, and Coverage**

- Media Plan
- Media Contact List
- Media Advertisements and Placement
- List of Coverage
- Copies of Articles

### **C. On-Line Engagement**

- Web page design
- Comment Card

### **D. Materials for Public Sessions**

- Forum Agenda + Kiosk List
- Part I: Presentations
  - Opening Remarks
  - LRTP Presentation
- Part II: Kiosks
  - Posters
  - Handouts
- Part III: Discussions
  - Tabletop Instructions
- List of participants

### **E. Session Evaluation**

- Evaluation form
- Results

**F. Facilitation Documents**

- Discussion Guide
- Training Materials

All items contained in this report have been submitted electronically. Additional information related to the planning process and the activities undertaken by the Snelling Center for Government are available upon request.