Stronger Together: How Regional Collaboration Created a $46 Million Clean Energy Pipeline Across Four Communities

Coordination across sectors help advance clean energy projects in municipal and rural markets in Douglas County, Kansas

AT A GLANCE

Investment Priorities

Water Treatment Plant Renewable Energy, Efficiency and Biogas Capture; Energy Efficiency Retrofits; Solar and Storage for Municipal Buildings and Multifamily Housing; Distributed Energy Generation & Storage, and EV Charging Infrastructure

Pipeline Value

$46 million across 95 sites

Key Partners

Douglas County Sustainability Office; Metropolitan Energy Center; Donovan Energy; Building Energy Exchange KC; Tenants to Homeowners (affordable housing) ; Aleo Prime; Evergy (utility); Habitat for Humanity (affordable housing); Peaslee Technical Institute (workforce center); Municipalities of Lawrence, Eudora, Baldwin City, and Lecompton

Community Impacts

16,427 MT CO_2e/year in estimated emissions reductions; 358 households reached through the affordable housing pipeline; lower energy costs in critically impacted communities; improved resilience outcomes and local workforce development across Douglas County.

Strategic Role

Convener | Market Builder | Regional Connector

The Path Forward

Evaluating opportunities to leverage Kansas's Linked Deposit Program, advancing predevelopment work for municipal and community-serving building projects, and continue exploring policy and market-development opportunities related to community solar, PACE financing, and other clean energy initiatives.

THE BIG PICTURE

The Challenge: Projects across the county are considered too small to attract outside investment or justify individual development efforts given the fragmented landscape — from Lawrence, a regional hub of nearly 100,000 residents—to three smaller cities, Eudora, Baldwin City, and Lecompton, ranging from roughly 600 – 6,000 residents, and 9 unincorporated townships. Key market rules around distributed energy are set at the state level, limiting local levers. The result: worthwhile projects exist, but the technical, financial, and organizational capacity to advance them is fragmented across jurisdictions.

The Solution: Through MIF, housing organizations, utilities, financial institutions, local governments, and technical experts joined forces to coordinate project development across jurisdictions, share technical resources, research creative financing, and identify regulatory barriers. The result is a $46 million pipeline in clean energy and energy-efficiency projects across affordable housing and nonprofit facilities, and five different municipal facilities, including water and wastewater infrastructure.

Image of a listening session in Lawrence, KS

CREATING THE FOUNDATION

Coalition Assembly
The coalition brought together the complementary expertise the market needed: Metropolitan Energy Center, a Kansas City nonprofit with 40 years in building and transportation energy; Donovan Energy, a clean energy finance advisor for capital planning and incentive optimization; Building Energy Exchange KC, a regional building performance organisation for local relationships, pipeline experience and national best practices; Tenants to Homeowners, which has helped 350+ families and manages 145 rental units; and Aleo Prime for building energy feasibility expertise. Together, they convened 18 clean energy practitioners, met with local banks, engaged congregations on energy audits and solar, and worked with utility Evergy on programs and regulatory pathways.

Financing Innovation
The coalition's most promising financing discovery wasn't a new program — it was an underused one: **the Linked Deposit Program**. Kansas operates a Housing Loan Deposit Program through the State Treasurer's Office with significant unused capacity. Under the Linked Deposit structure, public funds are deposited with participating lenders at below-market rates, enabling those lenders to offer qualifying borrowers reduced-interest loans — while retaining full underwriting responsibility. The coalition also identified Kansas's **Facility Conservation Improvement Program (FCIP)**, which covers 100% of energy audit costs for nonprofits, removing the single biggest barrier to entry for faith-based and community organizations. The lesson: activating what already exists can be as powerful as creating something new.

Regulatory Groundwork
Through MIF, the coalition identified several policy and market-development opportunities that could help strengthen the local clean energy financing ecosystem: Kansas Corporation Commission proceedings on community solar tariffs; PACE legislation for commercial property financing; a potential "Solarize Douglas County" group purchasing campaign; and Affordable Housing Trust Fund enhancements to better incentivize solar and efficiency for affordable housing.

While these concepts are not currently being advanced as funded initiatives, they represent potential pathways for reducing market barriers, expanding financing options, and increasing participation in clean energy investments. The coalition's work highlighted that policy frameworks, financing mechanisms, and market conditions can be just as important as project funding in determining whether clean energy investments can scale successfully. These aren't funded initiatives yet — they are the upstream conditions that determine how many of the 95 sites in the pipeline ultimately get built.

FEEDING THE PIPELINE: ALONG FOUR SECTOR TRACKS

Water & Energy Nexus | $18.5 Million The pipeline's anchor is a $12.5 million biogas capture project at the Lawrence Wastewater Treatment Facility — converting methane from the wastewater process into pipeline-ready renewable natural gas sold to an adjacent concrete plant. A $4.5 million solar installation at the same facility adds an estimated 1,742 MT CO_2e/year in reductions. Six additional water treatment facilities across Lawrence, Eudora, and Lecompton complete the sector.

Municipal Buildings | $15.4 Million Fifty-seven Douglas County buildings are bundled into a single $10.5 million solar portfolio — the aggregation model at its most direct — projecting 4,064 MT CO_2e/year in reductions. An EV charging portfolio adds $570,000. Standalone projects include ASHRAE Level II upgrades at the Historical Courthouse ($1.08M) and Human Services Building ($762K), plus solar at the new Public Safety Building and Judicial Law Enforcement Center.

Affordable Housing | $10.6 Million The majority of this investment targets critically impacted communities (358 Households). Three existing multifamily properties — Pine Crest Senior Village (60 units), Hillcrest Apartments (36 units), and Signal Ridge Villas (32 units) — are scoped for full retrofits: heat pumps, LED lighting, smart thermostats, EV chargers, and rooftop solar. New construction at Floret Hill (121 units, 100% in a critically impacted census tract) and Kasold Curve (50 households) deepens the pipeline.

Faith-Based & Nonprofit | $144,000 First Baptist Church Lawrence is the pipeline's first faith-based project — and a proof of concept for a largely untapped sector. FCIP covering 100% of audit costs for non profits eliminates the largest barrier to entry and opens a replicable pathway for congregations and community organizations across the county.

"Metropolitan Energy Center is proud to partner with Douglas County on this planning effort. We know that the cost of energy is rising, and efficiency and renewable energy solutions are more important than ever. Our role is to bring technical expertise and connect partners so Douglas County can design financing strategies that work for its unique needs and deliver long-term savings and resiliency to residents and organizations alike."

— Kelly Gilbert, Executive Director, Metropolitan Energy Center

PROVEN IMPACT & NEXT STEPS

The MIF grant turned a county sustainability office and a collection of interested partners into a functioning coalition with a $46 million pipeline and working relationships with every municipality in the county. The impact is already showing up on the ground.

From Idea to Project Coalition conversations with Lawrence revived a solar site adjacent to the wastewater treatment plant that had been abandoned during original construction — it is now in the pipeline. Eudora, deep in large-scale capital projects, had never considered efficiency or renewables for those facilities before the coalition engaged them — now they are. A local church that solicited solar bids years ago and never acted is moving forward with coalition support.

A Regional Workforce Pipeline Peaslee Technical Institute — a trade school with established electrical, HVAC, and construction programs — joined the coalition after attending the energy efficiency workshop. The portfolio approach is designed to give contractors and training programs the market visibility they need to invest in clean energy skills. Predictable project volume is what converts workforce training into workforce careers.

Tools Built to Travel. Beyond identifying projects and financing pathways through the state's LDP, the coalition developed and cataloged resources to support future clean energy deployment: a summary of Kansas regulations affecting distributed and community solar projects, a Municipal Clean Energy Lease Framework concept to help local governments and community institutions evaluate solar and energy-efficiency procurement options, and improvements to the Douglas County Energy Hub, a site that provides hyper-local information about clean energy and energy efficiency. While additional funding and technical assistance is needed to fully develop and deploy these, this demonstrates the value of accessible resources that help communities move from planning to implementation. By documenting lessons learned and building a foundation of shared knowledge, Douglas County has positioned itself to support future clean energy investment across the region.

The Strategic Opportunity Douglas County proved that aggregation works — that four communities, none of whom could build a bankable project alone, can come together and create a pipeline that capital can engage with. Local municipalities, housing organizations, utilities, financial institutions, and technical experts, worked as a coalition to identify a pipeline of potential projects and explore financing and policy strategies that would have been difficult for any single organization to pursue alone. It also underscored the importance of market-building activities such as stakeholder engagement, project development support, financing innovation, and policy analysis.

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