

## L'Anse Community Solar & Bob LaFave

Bob LaFave has served as the L'Anse Village Manager for the last 14 years. He is also currently working toward a PhD in Environmental and Energy Policy at Michigan Tech University. He applies what he learns as a student to his community, working on practical ways to save energy, money, and the planet.

Bob is always looking for ways to improve his community and make sure they are involved when decisions are being made. He previously had success in putting together a solar array for the water plant to offset some of its energy costs, and was able to lower water bills for everyone in the community. The success of this small project led to bigger questions about more ways that the community could benefit from solar. Bob first heard about community solar through the classes that he was taking and became interested if it was something that could be done in his community. He worked with partners to get guidance on if he could make a community solar project a reality in L'Anse. Because L'Anse is a municipal utility and had the support from their power provider, WPPI, they were able to immediately leap over many of the obstacles that other communities face when wanting to install community solar.

After learning that a community solar project was technically feasible and could make economic sense, Bob's next question was whether people in L'Anse wanted it, whether they would purchase shares in it and at what price, and how it should be designed to best meet the unique needs of the Village. Students and faculty at Michigan Tech helped answer these questions through interviewing residents, conducting surveys, and listening to ideas and concerns brought up at community meetings.

They found that access and inclusivity was key to the project, so they designed on-bill financing options for people who didn't have all of the money to pay up front and they created a low to moderate income component that was able to get families access to panels and energy efficiency improvements. The goal was to design a program that would work best for the community by addressing their needs and values.

*"This is a local program, designed by local folks that live here and work here, that has local benefits for the community. If it can be done in our little town here, I think it can be done just about anywhere, and I really do feel that way." - Bob LaFave*



*Bob LaFave standing in front of the L'Anse Community Solar panels.*

Over the course of two years and through the help of the Western Upper Peninsula Planning & Development Region, WPPI, UPSTART, and Michigan Tech, L'Anse received enough funding and support from the community to be able to pull off the project and make it a success. They sold all of the shares before the panels were even built. The project has been well received by the community and by others around the state and nation. Bob speaks regularly about its success in conferences and meetings with other community managers and planners.

The project has a tremendous impact on low to moderate income families. These families who struggled to keep their lights on are now better able to pay their electric bills. The project brings a sense of empowerment to the community as it is something that they had a hand in designing and is something that they own.

L'Anse was able to create a community solar project because they are a municipal utility with a willing power provider, but this is rare in Michigan. In fact, WPPI no longer supports community solar projects. We see the success and benefits that L'Anse achieved. Bob believes that every community should have the right to decide if they want community solar, and it will take state community solar enabling policy to achieve that.

*Ava Miller, BS student, Sustainability Science  
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