

Renewable Energy Benalla report for BSFG 2020 Annual Report

Renewable Energy Benalla (REB) Action Group

Renewable Energy Benalla Vision: For Benalla to become a zero net energy town by reducing and balancing energy demand with 100% renewable energy supply.

Whilst Renewable Energy Benalla (REB) was busy during the last six months of 2019 the arrival of the COVID 19 pandemic early in 2020 has resulted in the cessation of monthly meetings and most other activity.

Transition Strategy to 100% Renewables

The major focus for REB is to implement the Transition Strategy that was developed in conjunction with Beyond Zero Emissions. The transition strategy detailed three major strategies that need to be implemented to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and achieve zero net energy. These strategies are:

- i) Energy efficiency measures to reduce energy use,
- ii) Promote and install local roof top solar,
- iii) Investigate utility scale renewables, battery storage and micro grids.

Strategy 1. Promoting Energy Efficiency

A series of six fortnightly sessions focussing on improving the energy efficiency of existing houses were conducted during August to October. These sessions were advertised with the heading, *Reduce Energy Bills and Increase Thermal Comfort*, and covered the following topics: Understanding energy bills; Draught Proofing & Insulation; Lighting & Windows; Efficient Hot Water Systems, Heating and Cooling; Appliances & Cooking; Energy Monitoring, Solar Power & Batteries.

Renewable Energy Benalla was successful in obtaining a Community Sponsorship Grant from Benalla Rural City to enable us to conduct these sessions.

While the content of these sessions was well received we were somewhat disappointed with the relatively small number of participants. We will give consideration to what changes we need to make to have more people attend as our plans are to repeat these sessions for a number of years to help achieve the goal of reducing energy demand by one third over the remaining eight years of the transition strategy.

Strategy 2. Promoting Roof Top Solar

The final session of the Energy Efficiency series was about the advantages of installing solar panels and issues around battery storage. Another way to promote roof top solar was our work on establishing a community energy project.

Community Energy Project

As part of promoting roof top solar REB has been investigating the establishment of a Community Energy Project based on donations from the community that would provide solar panels for community buildings such as kindergartens. BSFG has established a Benalla Renewable Energy Fund that community members can donate to. This fund will be used to enable the installation of solar panels on kindergartens and other community buildings with no upfront costs required from the community organisation. We are planning to adopt the CORENA model of providing loans to the host sites with loan repayments based on the savings made on energy bills. The fund then becomes a revolving fund that enables loans to be made to other host sites for the installation of solar panels or implementation of energy efficiency measures.

REB has been successful in obtaining a small grant from the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP) to enable us to employ consultants to prepare guidelines for project management of the Community Energy Project including governance, fundraising, selection criteria, publicity and community engagement.

Communication Materials

As reported last year REB was successful in obtaining a grant from DELWP for the production of four communication pamphlets designed to encourage people to install solar panels and to provide information about energy efficiency.

The titles of the pamphlets; *Renewable Energy Benalla - Our Vision*
Energy Efficiency at Home,
Keeping a rental house comfortable and energy efficient,
Installing Solar Photo Voltaic (PV) and Batteries.

Strategy 3. Investigating Utility Scale Renewables

One member of the REB committee has been doing a lot of work investigating the possibility of establishing a regional utility scale waste to energy project in Benalla. A number of discussions have been held with Council staff about the feasibility of such a project. Further investigation and discussion with council will continue.

Community Engagement

Hume Region DELWP, as part of their *Climate Ready Hume* project had funds available for free screenings of the documentary film "2040" which looks at the effects of climate change over the next 20 years and what technologies that exist today can reverse the effects. BSFG and REB applied for a screening at BPACC in December which was very successful with 160 people attending.

The REB website, www.reb.org.au has been very successful and receives lots of 'hits'. Our thanks to Bev Lee and Peter Maddock, for their great work in maintaining the website.

North East Community Energy Network (NECEN)

This network consists of representatives from all the ten community energy groups in North East Victoria. Meetings are held every 2 months in Wangaratta but of late have been via Zoom. A lot of valuable networking takes place at these meetings with each group reporting on their activities.

This network is supported by Indigo Power.

One major initiative that REB took part in was a regional hot water bulk buy. There were two systems available; a very efficient heat pump system or an evacuated tube solar system. The major purpose was to encourage people to reduce energy demand by installing a very energy efficient hot water system. Four people took up this offer in Benalla with 65 systems being installed across the region.

Launch of Indigo Power

REB took part in promoting the launch of Indigo Power, a community owned energy company. There were a series of launches to be held in regional centres, including Benalla, but COVID 19 came along and the launches were conducted by Zoom. Indigo Power is a registered Social Enterprise, which means that 50% of profits will be shared amongst the community. Indigo Power aims to encourage the move to 100% renewable energy for our region.

Future of Renewable Energy Benalla

REB began as an action group of BSFG but then in August 2018 REB decided to become an incorporated association basically to protect the name from a potential commercial organisation wanting to adopt it.

The REB group has always been a small group and has struggled to meet its objectives and meet the requirements of the model rules for incorporated associations. We have decided to cancel REB's incorporation and revert to being an action group of BSFG once again.

Community Engagement to help Achieve our Vision

A plan to achieve zero net energy by 2028 is an ambitious and complex task. REB need more people from the community to assist with implementing the Transition Strategy. This may be to help with a small distinctive task or to become involved in the organisation of a specific event or project.

REB is currently investigating ways to improve our engagement with the Benalla community and to encourage people to become involved in achieving 100% renewables by 2028.

John Lloyd, Convenor, Renewable Energy Benalla