Institute for Policy & Social Research
Center for Compassionate & Sustainable Communities

Advocacy Perspectives on Just Energy Transitions

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Introduction: Just Energy Transitions in Context

Energy transitions are underway across the United States, with states and localities facing new energy infrastructure development, from clean energy technologies to new gas-fired power plants, and the need for economic revitalization in legacy coal communities remains an enduring concern. The first half of this decade was marked by significant growth in renewable energy projects; looking ahead to the second half of the decade, reduced political support for clean energy at the federal level combined with sharply rising energy demand projections are altering both the policy and physical landscape for energy transitions.

Just energy transitions depend, at base, on energy policy and decisionmaking that supports meaningful and tangible benefits for local communities informed by community influence and active involvement, even as energy policy inevitably serves broader than local goals.[1] Communities face the risk that policymaking at the federal or state levels may be disassociated from the deeply place-based nature of the energy transition, especially where residents may lack access or information needed to participate in policy spheres. Such approaches may face more resistance when they fail to address perceived local impacts, whether social, economic, or environmental. At the same time, new energy infrastructure brings physical change to communities that will rarely be met with a unanimous welcome. Accordingly, local outreach, engagement, and leadership are centrally important to project development where, as in Kansas, most land use decisions are made at the local level.

White Paper Overview

This White Paper is part of a larger collaborative project – funded by the Sloan Foundation – to study community-engaged, place-based policy for energy transitions in the United States with a focus on subnational energy policies. Working with teams in other states, our shared goal has been to characterize policy designs reflective of place-based needs for just transitions and synthesize best practices for energy transition policies based on case study approaches and a comprehensive review of energy transitions policies in context. We use empirical data analysis, policy analysis, and primary data collected in four case study locations (Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania).

As part of this larger project, we sought to better understand how advocates in Kansas conceive of "just energy transitions" and how, if at all, this concept shapes their work at the community scale within the state. This White Paper offers a synthesis of insights and opinions offered by a swath of advocates working specifically on the clean energy transition in the state of Kansas.

Kansas Context

Kansas has a strong energy production past and the potential for a strong energy production future. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, wind accounted for 52% of electricity net generation in 2024, making it the state with the third-highest percentage of wind generation after only Iowa and South Dakota.[2] In recent years, wind has consistently been the source of more than 40% of electricity generated in Kansas, with the rest mostly coming from coal, nuclear power, and natural gas. Solar generation has lagged behind wind generation in Kansas, but as one of the sunniest states in the nation, the generation potential in Kansas is significant.[3] Developers have proposed a growing number of utility-scale solar projects in the last five years, such as the Kansas Sky Energy Center in Douglas County.[4] Historically, Kansas has been a top-ten oil and gas producer and the major investor-owned utility in Kansas, Evergy, has proposed two new gas-fired power plants slated for Reno and Sumner Counties, in part to meet expected growth in electricity demand from data centers, battery factories, and other new high-demand industries.[5] Kansas is also home to the Wolf Creek nuclear power plant, and although not at all certain to go forward, early stage proposals for additional new nuclear capacity have made recent headlines.[6]

In Kansas, nuclear power plants and transmission lines are sited at the state level, but local governments have land use authority over most other forms of energy infrastructure, including wind and solar projects, which tend to be more geographically expansive than traditional fossil fuel-fired power plants.[7] With 105 counties and dozens of medium-to-large cities empowered to enact unique requirements for these projects, it is a complex permitting landscape for renewable energy developers and advocates.

In related work completed as part of this Sloan Foundation grant, the Kansas team created a first-of-its kind Kansas Energy Transition Atlas (KETA), a public, interactive web-based GIS database that includes regulations relevant to wind and solar developments adopted in each county, as well as municipal-level solar regulations for residential, commercial, and industrial rooftop and small-scale solar. (Due to the scale of wind installations, most wind developments are proposed in rural areas rather than cities and, in turn, cities have not adopted wind regulations.) Learn more about the KETA and the factors explaining variations in wind regulations at the county level in our forthcoming piece, Navigating Headwinds in the Green Energy Transition: Explaining Variations in Local-Level Wind Energy Regulations, forthcoming in the journal *Sustainability*.

Research Process

For this study, we developed a snowball sample of state and local organizations and individuals working in the clean energy transition policy arena. After gaining permission from the University of Kansas Institutional Research Board, which approved our study as adhering to ethical standards, we contacted organizations and individuals to gauge interest in participating in a semi-structured interview with our research team. In 2024, we conducted interviews with seven individuals

representing seven distinct organizations, including organizations with a primary focus on clean energy issues and organizations with primary interests in related topics, such as land conservation, air quality, and regional planning.

Each interview lasted about an hour (60 minutes). The interviews were conducted via video call or in person. The interviews were recorded digitally, with the subjects' consent. Digital recordings are stored on a KU machine protected by passcode available only to the PIs and authorized team members who have completed IRB training. Interview questions are presented below.

Our analysis process consisted of taking notes during the interviews and reading the interview transcripts to discern patterns of convergence and divergence in the interviewee's responses. We sought to identify key themes.

Interview Questions

1. How do you/how does your organization understand justice and equity in the clean energy transition? (*Follow-up questions, based on response)*

2. Does your organization engage energy transition issues at the community scale, and if so, can you describe how you do so? (*Follow-up questions, based on response)*

3. From your perspective, what have been the most significant drivers of clean energy successes in Kansas? (*Follow-up questions, based on response)*

4. From your perspective, what have been the biggest barriers to the clean energy transition in Kansas? (*Follow-up questions, based on response)*

5. Have these resulted in missed opportunities? (*Follow-up questions, based on response)*

6. Looking forward, are there neglected issues or opportunities that you think focused policy attention could assist? (*Follow-up questions, based on response)*

7. What are some of things you'd like to see help advance just energy transitions in Kansas? (*Follow-up questions, based on response)*

8. What are some of the things that would help advance just energy transitions from beyond KS? (Information, analyses, tools, peer networks, etc.) (*Follow-up questions, based on response)*

Synthesis: Themes

Our respondents raised myriad topics, issues, and challenges in response to our questions. Each respondent spoke from their own organizational and individual perspectives, such as advocating for farmers facing economic precarity, for inner-city residents suffering from harmful air quality, or for land stewards concerned about the long-term health of ecosystems. At the same time, our analysis identifies five core themes that cut-across the interviews.

1. ***Equity is a Central Concern for Energy Transitions:*** Interviewees consistently spoke about equity in terms of ensuring a safe, healthy, and fair state for all Kansans. Their comments touched on aspects of equity and environmental justice that are prominent in the literature. Our energy future needs to ensure economic opportunity for all people, even as that looks quite different from one community to the next and one group of people to the next. Our energy future needs to increase freedom and opportunity, rather than constrain it, which requires special attention to individuals and groups whose freedom and opportunity have been and continue to be limited due to their socio-economic status, education, race, and identities.

2. ***A Just Energy Transition is an Economic Issue:*** Time and again, interviewees centered equity and justice in the energy transition around economic prosperity. Interviewees highlighted multiple economic dimensions of the energy transition, varying based on their organizations' core mission and aims. For some interviewees, the main issue relates to the potential for renewable energy sources to provide more affordable electricity, in turn lowering rates and opening more discretionary income, especially in the face of inflationary pressures and increasingly unaffordable housing markets. An exemplar of a vexing challenge, however, is that renters lack capital to install solar panels or obtain a return on investment over the long-term. Conversely, while landlords may have the capital and long-term investment horizon, they do not stand to benefit from lower monthly utility bills, which are typically paid by the renters. Other interviewees emphasized the job creation potential of wind and solar energy development, which may offer opportunities if jobs decline in the fossil fuel sector. Still other interviewees emphasize the potential of wind and solar generation to open new streams of revenue for rural landowners, whose ability to ensure a livable income from agriculture alone has become increasingly difficult. [Notably, these interviews took place prior to international tariffs in 2025 threatened Kansas farmers with declining demand for Kansas crops from major buyers like China and were not anticipated in the responses.[8]]

3. ***Federal and State Policy Complexity and Instability Constrain the Transition***: Even before the shift from a pro-renewables Biden administration to a pro-fossil fuels Trump administration, interviewees raised the issue of instability in the policy context for local development of wind and solar. Interviewees mentioned the unpredictably introduced when Kansas shifted from a Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) that incentivized wind and solar development to its current weaker RPS, based on a goal long-surpassed.[9] State and federal policies and incentives shape the local regulatory environment, as does the regional market for renewable energy, and changes in federal and state policies can affect willingness to engage in shifts away from fossil fuel dependence. Likewise, the complicated regulatory environment, which involves state and federal regulators interacting with multi-state power pools and inter-state transmission systems, can likewise inhibit the willingness of investors to pursue wind and solar projects. One point raised time and again by interviewees was the glaring need for a long-range state energy plan in Kansas, as well as a much stronger and better resources state energy office.

4. ***Data and Tools to Inform Decision-Making Have Outpaced Consistency and Commitment***: Interviewees indicated that there always is a need for better data and technical tools to inform decision making. Yet, the array of data and tools available from government agencies, non-profit entities, and academic institutions has proliferated in recent years. Examples include regulatory

databases like the KETA developed as part of this project, environmental screening tools useful for identifying ecologically sensitive areas, and environmental justice screening tools that can identify areas in particular need of greater access and lower rates. In turn, the challenge of community-scale engagement is less a lack of knowledge and understanding and instead a lack of consistent commitment to support the energy transition.

5. ***Socio-Political <u>Conflicts Constrain</u> Consistency and Commitment:*** Interviewees noted that each of the other core issues are all shaped by highly contested social and political values and viewpoints. The complex and dynamic energy regulatory context is, in and of itself, a product of tensions between the market, government, and consumers. Partisan politics at the local level, often shaped externally by campaign contributions and lobbying efforts, can create divergent pressures to maintain the status quo and to transform the energy system. Locally, long-standing alliances within partisan dynamics are destabilized. For example, conservatives who oppose incentives for clean energy sources and local renewable energy development have sometimes found themselves in conflict with neighbors who generally share conservative political views, but see wind and solar developments as a way to ensure the viability of farming operations. Similarly, environmentalists committed to the conservation of natural and working landscapes in their existing state have sometimes found themselves in conflict with fellow environmentalists who see conversion of open spaces to wind and solar developments as a necessary trade-off to forestall the worst impacts of climate change. Further complicating these highly place-based conflicts is rapidly escalating demand for additional energy sources to power data centers and other energy-intensive land uses, which present similar potential for local controversy touching on often conflicting values and community preferences. Finally, a major challenge in recent years has been an increase in misinformation and disinformation about clean energy sources, such as over-estimating the negative impacts of wind turbines on migratory birds (especially when compared to habitat loss due to climate change or even compared to birds killed through collisions with structures in urban areas).[10] The challenge of helping decision makers to rely on reliable information is especially pronounced at the local level, particularly against the backdrop of the lack of information quality-assurance on social media and the rise in strategic deception deployed by political leaders. In this political environment, the opportunities for decision-makers to find policy solutions that offer mutual gains and win-win scenarios becomes nearly impossible.

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The insights from this research clarify common themes relevant to the conceptions of "just energy transition" based on the experience of local advocates in Kansas. Their perspectives reflect challenges with no easy solutions for community-scale energy policy and decision-making. They suggest local acceptance of energy transitions depends not only on political policy preferences, but also perceptions of fairness, economic impact, and the quality of information available to communities and their decisionmakers. The research also suggests the local context for energy transitions in Kansas has changed over time, becoming more contentious at the community-scale. This research lays the groundwork for future research on place-based energy transition policies related to specific kinds of infrastructure – electricity generation, for example, such as from wind versus solar or gas, or new sources of electricity demand, such as data centers.

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Data Availability Statement: All data available at the Kansas Energy Transition Atlas: https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/f37701d386824345951016dc61859057 (accessed on 2 October 2025).

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[1] The academic literature on the "just transitions" concept is far-reaching. Although discussion of that literature is outside the scope of this white paper, useful starting points in two pieces also written with this grant's support - see Fayola Jacobs, Elise Harrington, and Ward Lyles (eds). 2024 Just Energy Transitions. PLANNING THEORY AND PRACTICE. 25(4); Nadia Ahmad, Uma Outka, Danielle Stokes, & Hannah Wiseman, Synthesizing Energy Transitions, 39 GEORGIA STATE UNIV. LAW REVIEW 1087 (2023).

[2] U.S. Energy Info. Admin, Kansas State Energy Profile (last updated Sept. 18, 2025).

[3] U.S. Energy Info. Admin, Kansas State Energy Profile (last updated Sept. 18, 2025).

[4] U.S. Energy Info. Admin, Kansas State Energy Profile (last updated Sept. 18, 2025). See Solar Energy Industries Ass'n, State Overview: Kansas (data current through Q2 2025) (showing 455 MW of solar in the state).

[5] Kansas Corporation Commission, "News Release: KCC approves settlement agreements allowing Evergy to recover costs to build two gas plants and a solar facility" (July 7, 2025)

[6] U.S. Energy Info. Admin, Kansas State Energy Profile (last updated Sept. 18, 2025); Morgan Chilson, *Kansas partners with Evergy and TerraPower to explore building a next-generation nuclear power plant*, KANSAS REFLECTOR (Sept. 26, 2025).

[7] See K.S.A. § 12-741 et seq.; K.S.A. § 66-1,158 et seq.; K.S.A. § 66-1,177 et seq.

[8] See Calen Moore, *What tariffs mean for Kansas farmers seeing big sorghum yield,* USA Today (Sept. 27, 2025); Brock Wilson, *Kansas farmers sound alarm over soybean tariffs*, KWCH 12 News (Oct. 1, 2025).

[9] See Kansas Corporation Commission, "Overview of Kansas Renewable Energy Standard (RES)"; Kansas Renewable Energy Standards Act, K.S.A. 66-1256 et seq.

[10] See, e.g., Matthew Eisenson, et al./Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, *Rebutting 33 False Claims About Solar, Wind, and Electric Vehicles* (2024).