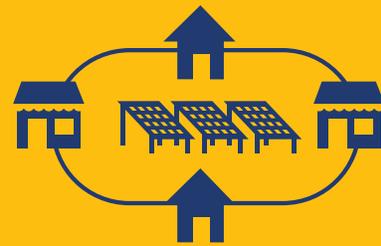


Case Study

February 2026

Rockford, IL Achieves Affordable Clean Energy and Community Benefits Through Innovative Illinois Shines Solar Development



Summary

Rockford, Illinois – once a leading national producer of furniture and heavy equipment – has felt the economic and environmental impacts of industrialization, and the after-effects of manufacturing departures and disinvestment. In recent decades, Rockford’s engaged and resilient community, including a workforce of skilled laborers, have collaborated to renew and diversify the city’s economic base into a new sector: clean energy.

For communities like Rockford, renewable energy projects provide more than clean, sustainable energy. They also create new jobs, economic activity, engagement with community organizations and partners, positive environmental impacts, and more. This case study highlights how local community leaders partnered with community-minded solar vendors to bring an Illinois Shines Community-Driven Community Solar (CDCS) project to Rockford to deliver significant community benefits and save local subscribers a projected \$4 million in electricity costs.

Facing the Challenge

In Rockford, the state’s fifth most populous city, over 21% of residents live below the poverty line.¹ The city’s workforce includes skilled construction, electrical, carpentry and other laborers ready to support an economic transformation of their beloved city. Could a community solar project provide the transformative benefits the city needed? Residents partnered to bring a community solar project to the city before. This experience allowed them to build a relationship with an established solar developer who was also an Approved Vendor (AV) in the Illinois Shines Program, a state-administered program that facilitates solar development through monetary incentives for the purchase of renewable energy credits.² The AV determined that Community-Driven Community Solar (CDCS) was the best project structure for the city’s needs. The partnership was interested in seeing this project come to fruition because CDCS projects center a commitment to direct and tangible benefits to the communities in which they operate. Benefits can include community ownership or wealth-building through project ownership, as well as involving members of the community in decisions on governance, operation, maintenance, upgrades, and subscriptions to the project. Additional benefits can take the form of bill savings, community revenue or tax credits, job creation, or other increased economic activity.

¹ As of the [2020 census](#)

² For more information on the incentive structure of Illinois Shines visit illinoisshines.com

Project Details



Project Name:
Rock Cut Solar



System Size:
4 MW



Expected yearly energy production:
9,840,000 kWh



Financing Type:
Private



First Year Subscriber Energy Savings:
\$243,600; over \$4 million projected savings over 15-year contract



Illinois Shines Project Category:
Community-Driven Community Solar (CDCS) project



Project type:
Community Solar

Developing a Solution

Project Planning

Rockford and the Approved Vendor started with some helpful advantages. The city’s community groups and civic leaders understood the benefits of solar, and some had previously worked together to represent the city’s interests. For its part, the Approved Vendor knew Rockford well from prior projects and had experience working with notable community advocates, including community champions like Sustain Rockford, North End Square Neighborhood, and Pastor Jeremiah Griffin. Ultimately, 10 community group leaders united to form the Rock Cut Solar Partnership to coordinate with the Approved Vendor on the project’s planning and design. The Rock Cut Solar Partnership also introduced organizations who hadn’t yet worked together. The diverse group became a critical source of information and ideas that allowed the city to best leverage the project for the community’s welfare.



Community Engagement and Benefit

The Rock Cut Solar Partnership and Approved Vendor committed to maximizing community benefits by not only consulting residents but by creating meaningful roles for them throughout the project. This included advocating for the project in city zoning meetings, discussing the appropriate perimeter screening to protect the views of the neighboring residents, and selecting the pollinator-friendly species to be planted in the solar farm. The process also involved the development of strategies to engage and educate local residents, businesses, and non-profits on the opportunity to subscribe to the solar project and save on their electric bills.

The Approved Vendor made donations to several area non-profits to support their missions and Rockford's long-term health, including committing:

- \$100,000 to the Rockford Area Habitat for Humanity to enhance and expand construction job training for more local high schoolers
- \$20,000 to Get Connected 815 to further its mission of helping local members impacted by incarceration to re-enter the community successfully and self-sustainably
- \$15,000 to Sustain Rockford to further its mission in educating residents, businesses, and non-profits in the community on sustainable living practices.

Most notably, the Approved Vendor committed to serving only local subscribers on the project and to pass on a significant percentage of the project's contract incentive value. This allowed the AV to offer low subscription costs and maximize monthly bill savings for subscribers, including for a local hospital.

Project Site Identification and Construction

After Rock Cut Solar received its Illinois Shines CDCS REC Incentive Contract, allowing the AV to receive Program incentives it could pass on to subscribers, the project moved forward with construction activities in April 2023.

Construction provided another opportunity for collaboration with the community, leaning on local unions' skilled laborers. The team engaged multiple labor unions for electrical, carpentry, and construction activities, including Carpenters Local 792. Construction began in August 2024 and concluded in April 2025. Throughout, the Approved Vendor collaborated closely with the partnership to ensure those who might benefit most from the project would receive continuous project updates.

Reaching Subscribers

The Rock Cut Solar Partnership emphasized community outreach and education to ensure local residents and businesses shared in the project's benefits.

Get Connected 815, a Rockford-based organization founded by Tretara Flowers, a Winnebago County resident and advocate for Rockford's low-income community, played a key role in Rock Cut Solar's outreach. At an in-person kickoff at a Rockford food pantry, and at other community events, Get Connected 815 promoted the project's reservation of 20% of subscriptions for low-income residents, whose subscription fees will not exceed 50% of the community solar bill credits they'll receive for participating, providing them substantial discounts on their bills.

“There are a multitude of good reasons to get behind renewable energy, but for people in communities hurting for good-paying jobs, it's an avenue that opens up a lot of opportunities, both for new members and apprentices. It has become a huge lift for the community.”

- Brad Long, President of Carpenters Local 792

Results

Rock Cut Solar's 35-acre project was electrified in August 2025. Upon completing initial project development, the Approved Vendor transferred the project to a partner Approved Vendor who shares their commitment to community benefit. The new Approved Vendor took over project operation and provided a 20% discount to all subscribers in Winnebago County, including businesses and nonprofits. This discount resulted in \$200-300 in annual savings per subscriber. The savings were even more pronounced for the 200 low-income residents whose subscription fees will not exceed 50% of the community solar bill credits they'll receive for participating, saving them an estimated \$500 annually. In total, first year energy savings for residents are estimated to be \$243,600 and over the next 15 years, Rock Cut Solar is projected to save subscribers approximately \$4 million in electricity costs.

Rock Cut Solar also provided many other community wealth benefits. The project, built with the help of local skilled laborers, was estimated to provide approximately \$3 million in direct benefits to local contractors across estimated construction costs. Rock Cut Solar is delivering clean energy to Rockford and helping build a more resilient economy while doing so, including nearly \$700,000 in estimated property tax revenues (based on current rates, and as noted in the Illinois Shines project application's Direct Benefits table) to be paid over its 35-year life. The community partners involved, some of whom also received donations from the developers to sustain their work, have developed lasting relationships that have extended beyond the project, enabling them to continue to serve the community. The project's new Approved Vendor continues to champion community involvement and consistently collaborates with the Rock Cut Solar Partnership to maintain the project's community benefits.

“With the funding provided by the project, Rockford Area Habitat for Humanity expanded and now includes students from three area high schools who receive construction training and build a house from the ground up. This is a perfect example of community wealth building. We're teaching our future trades people and our kids about the future of energy and also making a difference to our earth and grid.”

- Keri Asevedo, Executive Director of Rockford Area Habitat for Humanity

Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Work with trusted local partners.** The Rock Cut Solar partnership and Approved Vendor found that working with Rockford leaders, such as Get Connected 815, was instrumental in gaining residents' trust. Community members unfamiliar with solar projects and the community solar subscription model initially had questions about the benefits the project might bring. The partnership's efforts to explain community solar and the Rock Cut Solar subscription model, how the project would further benefit the community, and to address questions and concerns, built community support the project needed to succeed. Get Connected 815 helped reach Winnebago County's low-income community, emphasizing the importance of both webinars and an in-person kickoff event to educate and engage residents, ensuring all voices were heard.
- 2. Be flexible and leverage local support and expertise.** Community Solar projects like Rock Cut Solar take significant time to develop, from planning and zoning signoffs to construction and electrification. The Approved Vendor's ability to remain flexible and pivot when needed – both by communicating with the community but also leveraging their support – kept the project visible for residents, despite lengthy timelines. The Partnership's community groups advocated for the project at zoning meetings, illustrating another important benefit of working with local leaders/community groups and benefits of the CDCS category. The community's familiarity with the project helped construction move forward, including obtaining building permit approvals and project mobilization.
- 3. Engage and invest in community members early.** The Rock Cut Solar Partnership made the project possible and was critical to the channeling of benefits to the project development itself and to the community. Engaging this community coalition early helped the Approved Vendor identify potential project sites, find ways to maximize meaningful community benefit and involvement, and activate a skilled, local workforce. Most importantly, the Approved Vendor and the partnership found multiple ways to maximize community benefit, including donations that would help local non-profits expand their reach, scope, and impact. The project also forged meaningful relationships and sparked conversations between the community groups about ways to continue working together to improve their community. These relationships are expected to be an important part of the Rock Cut Solar project's legacy.



**Interested in bringing a Community-Driven
Community Solar project to your area?**

Visit the Illinois Shines [CDCS page](#) for more details.