

# ADVANCING SMALL BUSINESS SOLAR EQUITY

# APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW

# GUIDE

LAKE STREET–WEST BROADWAY–UNIVERSITY AVENUE  
MINNEAPOLIS AND SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA



Photo by Brandon Stengel for BWBR Architects, Inc ([www.bwbr.com](http://www.bwbr.com))

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## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

### **ADVANCING SMALL BUSINESS SOLAR EQUITY**

#### **About this document**

This document is an appendix of “Advancing Small Business Solar Equity: Final Technical Insights Report” (Kazinka et al. 2024), a report published by Lake Street Council and its partners as an outcome of their participation in the Solar Energy Innovation Network. The full report and other appendices can be found at [www.visitlakestreet.com/business-blog/sein-report](http://www.visitlakestreet.com/business-blog/sein-report).

#### **About the Solar Energy Innovation Network**

The Solar Energy Innovation Network (SEIN) seeks to overcome barriers to solar adoption by connecting teams of stakeholders who are pioneering new ideas with the resources they need to succeed. SEIN is funded by the US Department of Energy Solar Energy Technologies Office and is led by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

Teams that participate in SEIN receive direct funding and analytical support from the US Department of Energy national laboratories and participate in peer-to-peer learning with other teams tackling similar challenges. These teams are developing and documenting their solutions for solar adoption with scale in mind so that others can adapt those solutions to their own contexts. Ultimately, the true impact of these teams’ efforts will be to enable a wide array of communities to adopt solar solutions that meet their needs in their contexts.

#### **Disclaimer**

This work was authored by Lake Street Council et al. under Subcontract No. SUB-2022-10131 as part of the Solar Energy Innovation Network, a collaborative research effort administered by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory under Contract No. DE-AC36-08GO28308 funded by the U.S. Department of Energy’s (DOE) Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Solar Energy Technologies Office. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Alliance for Sustainable Energy, LLC, the DOE, or the U.S. Government.

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#### **Overview**

This “Interview Guide” was created by the Solar Energy Innovation Network’s Advancing Small Business Solar Equity team based in Minnesota. As described in “Section 2.1: Human-Centered Design Process” in the main body of the report, it was developed as part of a human-centered design approach used by the community-based team to understand the Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)- and immigrant-owned small business lived experience, gain insights, and challenge assumptions. The interviews conducted using this process contribute to the Advancing Small Business Solar Equity team’s efforts to co-create and pilot solutions to reduce inequities in solar adoption, increase business resilience, and build capacity and leadership to sustain ongoing community action.

#### **Development**

In response to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory’s request for proposals, the team identified a design challenge: How might we address barriers to solar program adoption by BIPOC- and immigrant-owned businesses in corridors impacted by systemic racism and civil unrest to increase installation of solar and solar plus storage?

Taking up the challenge question, the project began with brainstorming sessions to consider the following questions: What do we already know? What are our assumptions? What do we need to learn more about?

An outcome of these discussions was identifying people to interview and organizations to connect with to better understand the barriers and determine potential solutions. The team identified the following groups of people to interview:

Group 1—Small business owners in the corridors without solar installed

Group 2—Small business owners in the corridors with solar installed

Group 3—Solar installers

Group 4—Solar experts

Questionnaires for each group were developed, guided by the human-centered design approach to interviews. The questionnaires had two primary types of questions: general questions intended as conversation starters and go-deep questions intended to explore motivations, frustrations, and interactions to build understanding.

General questions: What are some broad questions you can ask to open the conversation and warm people up? Don’t forget to ask about personal details. Who are you meeting, and what are their demographics (profession, age, location, etc.)?

Go-deep questions: What are some questions that can help you start to understand this person’s hopes, fears, and ambitions? Don’t forget to ask about motivations, frustrations, and interactions. What do people care about the most? What motivates them? What frustrates

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them? What needs do they have that aren't being met? What is interesting about the way they interact with their environment?

Interview expectations and best practices include the following:

- Interviews are 30–60-minute structured conversations conducted in person or via Zoom.
- Interviews are conducted in pairs. This helps to develop a broad understanding on the team, gets everyone out in the community, and expands perspectives based on what each person hears. Although ideal, this may not work for all people. When selecting interviewers, consider whether an outsider, such as city staff or utility staff, decreases the likelihood of a candid conversation.
- Begin all interviews with greetings and a round of introductions.
- The interview questions are intended as a guide. You do not need to ask every question; in many cases, you may not be able to fit all questions within 30–60 minutes.
- Take notes and capture key quotes and ideas. Note emotional context—excitement, concern, etc.
- Small group meetings will be used to debrief the interviews using a participatory process.

### Mutual partnership and compensation

In all interactions, we seek mutual relationships and partnership. Consider: What is the value of the interview for the interviewee? How can all interactions bring value and not extract value or dehumanize the experience of the community? Mutuality includes compensation for participants' time, which the team exercised in the form of a \$50 Visa gift card.

### Logistics

The team organized the interview materials (questions, interviewee lists, scheduling, etc.) utilizing shared Google Docs and Sheets. A READ ME document served as a table of contents with links to all interview-related resources. This allowed the team one point of entry for all tasks.

In-person interviews are preferred as they allow for a shared experience, impromptu learning from the environment, and stronger interpersonal connections. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted primarily using Zoom. Several interviews were conducted in person with the agreement of all parties.

### References

The human-centered design process was informed to a large extent by the work of IDEO, a design company. Two resources continue to guide the team's process in developing program models that place small business owners at the center of the work:

- Tim Brown, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (New York: Harper Business, 2009).
- *Design Kit: The Course of Human-Centered Design* (Acumen Academy and IDEO.ORG), <https://www.designkit.org/resources/5.html>.

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#### **Project foregrounding**

The following information was used as a reference to introduce the project to the person being interviewed.

#### *Project goal*

The Solar Energy Innovation Network Advancing Small Business Solar Equity project goal is to increase solar adoption and resilience of BIPOC-owned small businesses and build capacity and leadership in the community to sustain ongoing action.

#### *Structure and funding*

It is a community-led project funded by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

#### *Partners*

Lake Street, led by Lake Street Council (LSC)

University-Midway, led by Neighborhood Development Center (NDC)

West Broadway, led by Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON)

Great Plains Institute (GPI)

William Weber Consulting, LLC

City of Minneapolis

City of Saint Paul

Xcel Energy

#### *Objectives*

- Collaboratively develop a scalable model(s) for underserved small businesses with a priority on BIPOC- and immigrant-owned businesses in the Lake Street, West Broadway, and University-Midway corridors to adopt solar based on a deep assessment of business needs, barriers, and preferences.
- Ensure that the proposed business model(s) supports the continued success of small businesses in underserved communities and builds community wealth.
- Provide education and ongoing support to small businesses on the opportunities and risks involved with installing solar, including available incentives and potential economic benefits.
- Share lessons learned with regulators, solar installers, program managers, etc., to ensure that appropriate changes are made to existing regulations, programs, and business offerings.

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#### Sample email for outreach to a small business from a community organization

##### *Subject*

“Request for interview” or “Request for interview about your business”

##### *Body text*

Hi [Individual’s Name],

I hope this finds you well. I’m reaching out from the [Organization’s Name] to see if you would be willing to participate in an interview with me about [Business’s Name].

We are part of a project that is exploring how we can help more small businesses benefit from solar energy. Solar energy can be a wealth-building opportunity and is expected to grow significantly in the coming years. We know many small businesses are curious about it but don’t know whether it is a fit for them.

For us to approach this issue, our broader stakeholder team needs to better understand the issues facing small businesses in our community. Our interview with you would be focused primarily on how you run your business and what issues, challenges, and opportunities are most important to you. We’ll also ask you a few questions about solar, but you don’t need to know anything about it.

Could you let me know if you’d be interested and available to participate in an interview? We are hoping to conduct interviews by [Date]. We can meet in person or over Zoom, whichever you prefer. To thank you for your time, we will leave you with a \$50 prepaid Visa card.

Please let me know if you’d be interested. If you are, please let me know when you would be available or select from the list of times below that I know are open for me:

[List of time options]

Thank you!

[Contact Name]

[Contact Information]

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#### Sample email for outreach to a small business from a team partner

##### *Subject*

“Request for interview” or “Request for interview about your business”

##### *Body text*

Hello [Individual’s Name]!

I hope this finds you well. I’m reaching out from [Organization’s Name] to see if you would be willing to participate in an interview with me about your experience installing solar, especially as it pertains to underserved businesses.

We are part of a project that is exploring how we can help more small businesses equitably access solar energy with a focus on the corridors that were most heavily damaged during the civil unrest in 2020. We are working in partnership with Lake Street Council on Lake Street, Neighborhood Development Center (NDC) on University Avenue, and Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON) on West Broadway.

For us to approach this issue, our broader stakeholder team needs to better understand the barriers facing underserved (especially BIPOC- and immigrant-owned) small businesses in our community from adopting solar. Our interview with you would be focused primarily on your understanding of the barriers for these small businesses and your thoughts about ways to overcome those. We’ll also ask you a few questions about your business and offerings.

**Would you be willing to participate in an interview?** We are hoping to conduct interviews over the next few weeks. We plan to conduct the interviews over Zoom. To thank you for your time, we will leave you with a \$50 prepaid Visa card.

If you are willing to participate in an interview, you can click on the link below and choose a time. If you have any questions you would like us to answer before scheduling, please reach out to me.

[Include a link to a calendar scheduling site]

Best,

[Contact Name]

[Contact Information]



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#### Interview outline for Group 1: Small business owners in the corridors without solar installed

##### Overview

###### *Intent*

The intent of the small business scoping interviews is to understand the lived experience of the small business owner. The emphasis is on building empathy and on their experience as a business owner, including motivations, frustrations, and interaction with the community. This also includes their everyday concerns and operating parameters, their goals for the business, and how they make decisions in light of opportunities, challenges, and risks. To develop an understanding of the unique experience of each community, interviews with representative businesses from each corridor will be conducted.

###### *Interviewee pool and outreach*

The community-based organizations identified BIPOC- and immigrant-owned small businesses for interviews and led the outreach effort to set them up. This is essential since the local organizations are trusted entities with existing relationships. The outreach will be done by phone and email. The leads by corridor are as follows:

Lake Street, led by Lake Street Council (LSC)

University-Midway, led by Neighborhood Development Center (NDC)

West Broadway, led by Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON)

##### Questions

The interview is broken down into three areas: about your business, about the community, and about energy and solar. The interview has both general and go-deep questions. The interview questions were developed by the team. The questions for small businesses were written and vetted by the community-based organizations.

###### *About your business*

###### *General*

What do you do here? (optional)

Why did you decide to go into business?

How long have you been in business?

What's a typical day like for you?

How did you choose this location?

- Do you own or rent your space?
- Do you plan to stay here (in this location)? If yes, why? If not, what's next?

(For renters) When your building is in need of improvements, do you feel that you can productively work with the property owner to get those improvements implemented?

Do you have plans for expansion? Changes to the building?

What does growth look like in the next couple of years?

What are your priorities for your business?

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#### *Go deeper*

How do you make decisions for your business? For example—

- Who influences a decision?
- What do you look for in an outcome?
- What is the length of commitment that is comfortable for you? How far out do you plan?
- How do you weigh taking on new debt for your business? Are there times when it is a deal breaker?

What's your biggest concern for your business?

What needs do you have that aren't being met?

What motivates you?

What frustrates you?

How have racism and other structural barriers impacted the way you do business and your growth opportunities?

What has helped you navigate and get around systemic barriers caused by racism and discrimination?

What would help you eliminate barriers to access caused by racism and discrimination?

#### *About the community*

What are your hopes for your community?

What are the biggest challenges (priorities) facing your community?

What people or organizations in the community does your business rely on?

- Do you have a good working relationship with an organization?
- Who is a connector?

When you are hiring contractors or seeking suppliers, what is most important to you?

Cost? Service? Relationship? Whether it is locally based? Job creation? Something else?

#### *About energy and solar*

Do you pay close attention to your energy bills?

Have you done anything to try to reduce your energy bills, like an energy audit or energy efficiency upgrades? If yes:

- Did you use an Xcel Energy program or other form of assistance?
- How was the experience with that program? Were you happy with the improvements that you made?

Do you have any additional changes you want to make to save energy?

- If yes, what would help you do more?
- If not, are you interested in learning how you can save money on your energy bills?

Have you looked into installing solar? If yes:

- Who did you speak to about it?

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- What were they offering?

What do you think would help you make an informed decision to install solar?

Are you interested in learning more about solar? This isn't a sales pitch, but as we develop the program, we'd like to keep you in the loop if you're interested.

#### *Wrap-up*

Offers for follow-up information

- Would you like us to follow up with you with more information about solar?
- Would you like us to follow up with you with more information about ways to reduce your energy bills?

Thank you!

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#### Interview outline for Group 2: Small business owners in the corridors with solar installed

##### Overview

###### *Intent*

The purpose of interviewing small businesses with experience in solar energy is to gain insight into their experience and decision-making. In addition, this is an opportunity to expand our understanding of the lived experience of the small business owner in building an understanding of the goals they have for their business and how they make decisions in light of the opportunities, challenges, and risks.

###### *Interviewee pool and outreach*

Working with Minneapolis and Saint Paul city staff, program data (e.g., Minneapolis Green Cost Share program), and Google Maps images, the Great Plains Institute (GPI) identified a list of small businesses with solar in each of the corridors. The community-based organizations selected specific businesses from the list to be interviewed and led the outreach to businesses to set them up. Community-led outreach is essential since the organizations are known, trusted entities with existing relationships. The outreach was done by email and phone. The leads by corridor are as follows:

Lake Street, led by Lake Street Council (LSC)

University-Midway, led by Neighborhood Development Center (NDC)

West Broadway, led by Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON)

##### Questions

The questions are broken down into three areas: about your business, about energy and solar experience, and about the community. The interview questions were developed by the team with input from all partners. The questions for small businesses were written and vetted by the community-based organizations.

###### *About your business*

###### *General*

What do you do here? (optional)

Why did you decide to go into business?

How long have you been in business?

What's a typical day like for you?

How did you choose this location?

- Do you own or rent your space?
- Do you plan to stay here (in this location)? If yes, why? If not, what's next?

Do you anticipate your business changing in the coming years?

What are your priorities for business?

###### *About energy and solar*

You have solar on your business. How did you make the decision to add solar to your business?

For example—

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- What or who influenced the decision? Follow up with a reflecting question to go deeper.
- Was there a “Yes! I’m doing this” moment? If yes, tell me about it.
- What outcome were you hoping for? What motivated you? If needed, suggest options: Energy savings, cash flow, values, etc.
- How did you finance your array?
- Did you use a program or incentive? If yes, which ones? What impact did they have on your decision-making?
- Was the length of the commitment a factor in the decision-making for you?
  - How does it compare to other business decisions?
  - How far out are you willing to make financial commitments?
- Would you do it again?

About the array.

- Get (or confirm) the specifics—How big is it? Who installed it? When?

Were there any barriers that got in the way or complicated the process?

- If yes, can you talk about what they were and the impact they had on the project? How did you get around them?
- Are there improvements in the programs that could make them easier to access and navigate?
- Did you do anything to try to reduce your energy bills before the solar installation? If yes, did you use an Xcel Energy program or other form of assistance? If yes, how was the experience with that program?

*Go deeper*

The project is specifically addressing systemic racism and looking for ways to address it.

- May I ask you a few questions about your solar installation experience?
- Have racism and other structural barriers impacted the way you do business and your growth opportunities?
- What has helped you navigate and get around systemic barriers caused by racism and discrimination?
- What would help you eliminate barriers to access caused by racism and discrimination?

*About the community*

What are your hopes for your community?

What people or organizations in the community does your business rely on?

- Do you have a good working relationship with an organization?
- Who is a connector?

What are the biggest challenges (priorities) facing your community?

When you are hiring contractors or seeking suppliers, what is most important to you? Cost?

Service? Relationship? Whether it is locally-based? Job creation? Something else?

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#### *Wrap-up*

Would you be willing to share your story about how and why you invested in solar with other business owners of color in your community?

Thank you!

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#### Interview outline for Group 3: Solar installers

##### Overview

###### *Intent*

Solar installers hold a wealth of knowledge based on firsthand experience with installations and clients. The interviews intend to explore what is working with current programs, identify challenges and barriers, and gather suggestions for program improvements. In addition, many local installers are also small business owners facing similar challenges and opportunities as the future program's core audience. As with all interviews being conducted as part of the project, we seek to understand, honor, and value the perspective of people in the community.

###### *Interviewee pool and outreach*

The Great Plains Institute (GPI) identified a list of solar installers working in the Twin Cities, drawing on state and organizational contacts. Outreach for solar installer interviews was conducted by GPI staff via email and phone.

##### Questions

The questions are intended to understand the industry from the installer's perspective. They are organized into sections: about your company, about your customers, and about programs.

###### *About your company*

This section is intended to get a broad picture of the business.

- What is your role in the company (owner, installer, etc.)?
- When was your company established?
- How long have you been installing solar (individual and company)?
- What drew you to this work?
- Who are the main partners you work with?
- Do you have a target for growth?
- Are you based in Minneapolis or Saint Paul? If yes, are you located in one of the corridors?
- Is your company BIPOC- or immigrant-owned?
- How many employees do you have?
- Does your company have specific equity and diversity goals?
- What would you say the percentage of your staff identifies as BIPOC or immigrant (under 25 percent, between 25 and 50 percent, or over 75 percent)?

###### *About your customers*

What is your customer model (residential, commercial, community solar, solar plus storage, or other)?

Tell us about a typical project for you.

- What type of systems are installed (size, percent load met)?
- How often do projects include energy storage (battery backup)?

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- How do projects get funded or financed?
- How long does a project take from start to finish?
- Do you know why the business chose to invest in solar?
- Are there any common snags in the process?
- What, from your experience, are the primary barriers for customers who want to install solar but do not go forward with the project?

Do you have any experience installing solar for BIPOC- and immigrant-owned (underserved) small businesses?

- If yes:
  - What were your previous BIPOC-focused projects?
  - Who were your partners in those projects?
  - What did you see as barriers those businesses had to overcome?
  - Any advice on how to overcome those barriers?
  - What would you say are the biggest opportunities?
- If no:
  - Why? (Prompts: Lack of relationships? Perceived complexity? Biases—racial, financial, safety, etc.?)
  - Do you think you will in the future?

In your experience, are barriers exacerbated for BIPOC- and immigrant-owned small businesses?

#### *About programs*

##### *Utility-based*

Have your company and clients found it difficult to work with Solar\*Rewards® when the funding runs out? If yes, follow up on the nature of the difficulty.

Were you aware that the Sustainability Office in the City of Minneapolis offers support to Minneapolis installers and customers who experience difficulty with interconnection?

##### *Funding and finance*

Do you have financing available?

- If yes, is the financing specifically for underserved businesses?
- Are there credit checks?

Does your company anticipate marketing the federal funding available through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) to help grow your business?

- If yes, does your company plan to also pursue the federal IRA funding available for disadvantaged communities?

Do you have low- to moderate-income carve-outs for customers?

Other tools to increase affordability and access?



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Do you know of successful models for solar financing for underserved communities?

What are key features or components for a successful model for equitable access to solar for small, underserved businesses?

Does your company have specific equity goals?

Does your company work with any programs or make special efforts to identify and train low-income or BIPOC workers? If so, what has worked well? What doesn't work so well?

#### *Wrap-up*

Would you be willing to share a typical solar proposal (pro forma) for a small business?

Are there questions we didn't ask that we should have?

Thank you!

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#### Interview outline for Group 4: Solar experts

##### Overview

###### *Intent*

Experts have a wealth of knowledge based on their varied experience across the solar industry and community. The interviews intend to explore big ideas, identify trends, and understand the current landscape of rooftop solar both locally and nationally. The focus is less on the individual and more on a wide view to identify opportunities, challenges, and barriers and gather suggestions for program improvements. As with all interviews being conducted as part of the project, we seek to understand, honor, and value the perspective of people in the community.

###### *Interviewee pool and outreach*

The team identified a list of experts to be interviewed during a brainstorming and mapping exercise of the current Twin Cities solar landscape challenges and opportunities. The intention was to select a group with varied expertise and experience. Outreach for expert interviews was conducted by the Great Plains Institute (GPI) staff via email and phone.

##### Questions

The questions are intended to gain a broad perspective on the industry. The focus is less on their business and more on broad trends. Nonetheless, the interview starts with some grounding questions about their background.

###### *About the expert*

We are asking you to step back and take a wide view across the industry based on your experience and knowledge.

- How did you get involved with the industry?
- What is your role? (or) What does your company (you) do?
- How long have you been doing this?
- What's changed the most since you got started?

###### *About the solar landscape*

Keeping in mind that we are working to develop programs to increase solar adoption for BIPOC, immigrant, and small businesses.

- From your experience, what are promising new directions in the industry?
- Where do you see untapped potential? Do you have thoughts about how to unlock that potential?
- What are the biggest challenges and barriers facing the industry in the short term? Long term? Follow-up: Do you see solutions?
- What are the pain points? Follow-up: Do you see solutions?
- Are there any long-term trends that you see as positives?

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What do you think are the key features or components for a successful model for equitable access to solar for small businesses?

Taking the industry as it exists today, what are the barriers that stem from systemic racism?

- How can they be overcome?
- Who needs to be involved in breaking them down?

Is there anything we didn't ask that we should be asking?

#### *Wrap-up*

Let us know if you think of anything else we should know.

Thank you!