Takeaways from *The Future Grid Through a Municipal Lens*

Grid Modernization Advisory Council (GMAC) Stakeholder Event | July 17, 2025

Overview

The Grid Modernization Advisory Council (GMAC) hosted its first in-person event to convene municipal stakeholders and community leaders interested in and taking steps to decarbonize and electrify their cities and towns. Attendees heard from three panels of speakers from the GMAC, municipal government, and electric distribution companies (EDCs) to learn about the actions Massachusetts is taking to modernize and proactively plan our electric grid, including the Electric-Sector Modernization Plans (ESMPs). Attendees engaged in facilitated small group discussions to explore opportunities and challenges of updating our electric grid and help identify priority topics for the GMAC's future work.

Discussions at this event highlighted that the input and partnership of municipalities can make grid planning efforts stronger, more equitable, and more responsive to communities across the Commonwealth. Cities and towns are actively working to electrify their fleets, install clean energy technologies, implement building decarbonization strategies, and help residents manage energy costs. Collaboration across local, state, and utility actors is essential to ensuring that plans to modernize the electric grid are grounded in real-world needs and opportunities. The future grid should serve everyone equitably.

Minutes from the event are also available on the GMAC website. This document summarizes key themes gathered from stakeholder questions to the panels, feedback collected in the small group facilitated discussions, and responses to the post-event survey. The GMAC will use these takeaways to inform their 2026 GMAC Strategic Plan and future public stakeholder session agendas.

Takeaways

Communication and Relationship Building

1. **Stakeholders expressed that there is a need for increased communication and relationship-building across different entities and actors but noted there are capacity limitations.**

Multiple event attendees noted that municipalities should be communicating with their EDCs about upcoming projects earlier in the planning process and on a more regular basis.

Municipalities are interested in growing their relationship with the utilities but are uncertain about how to do this (such as who to contact, whether the EDCs will be responsive, and clarifying when municipalities should reach out to the EDCs). Event attendees also raised concerns about the capacity of municipalities for increased planning.

2. **There is a disconnect between the EDC's grid planning activities and municipal building-level planning.**

There are gaps in attendee knowledge and communication about concurrent processes related to the grid, and event attendees seek to understand grid processes better. Event attendees discussed the need for grid planning to work better with community-level implementation policies, such as planning and zoning. Discussions mentioned concurrent processes including the GMAC, the ESMPs, integrated energy planning, community level efforts related to Mass Save, and municipal-driven electrification. Stakeholders emphasized that municipal staff could add value to grid planning with local knowledge.

3. **There is a lack of readily available information on EDC planned investments and how those investments impact communities.**

Stakeholders find that EDC decision-making lacks transparency and that it is difficult to understand where upgrade projects are along the project lifecycle. This challenges municipal planning. One panelist highlighted that the ESMPs generally aren't more granular than the substation level, and municipalities interact with street-level planning.

4. **Municipalities are frustrated by the time it takes for utilities to respond to their requests.**

Stakeholders expressed frustration that they feel the EDCs are not meeting their communities' needs. It was acknowledged that sometimes this problem is perpetuated by a mismatch of municipal and EDC contacts. For example, the EDCs may interact with other municipal contacts, such as the police department, which may have little crossover with municipal contracts responsible for sustainability or electrification. This communication gap may result in longer response timelines.

Grid Planning Education

1. **Municipalities are looking for ways to make engaging in grid planning manageable and accessible.**

Stakeholders expressed a need for more plain-language presentations and resources on grid planning. Grid planning could be made more engaging through storytelling that connects to residents' everyday lives. Stakeholders also discussed how difficult it is to stay informed about important grid planning updates and would like to explore strategies to streamline information sharing that is clear and digestible.

2. **Stakeholders are interested in better understanding the broader landscape of energy planning, the role of each agency, and how different aspects of energy all fit together.**

Municipal stakeholders raised questions during the facilitated discussions about different grid planning entities, such as ISO New England, the Energy Facilities Siting Board (EFSB), the Department of Public Utilities (DPU), and the Department of Energy Resources (DOER). Stakeholders are looking for clear descriptions of roles and authorities of entities engaged in grid planning to better identify how municipalities can get involved or influence grid planning in the state. There is also interest in understanding what other states are pursuing in terms of grid modernization.

Cost Challenges

1. **High costs to upgrade the grid are a challenge to implementing electrification.**

Municipal stakeholders mentioned additional costs, such as for engineering studies, and long timelines as barriers to electrification projects. Some attendees shared concerns about the costs of connecting to the grid as a barrier for electrification, especially in municipalities with limited funding for grid infrastructure upgrades.

2. **There is interest in moving away from a cost-causation model for grid upgrades to a model that uses a fixed fee that goes into an upgrade fund.**

Stakeholders enjoyed learning about the Simplified Common System Modification Fee concept, which was discussed during the event's third panel. Municipalities are interested in being updated on any investigation by the Department of Public Utilities into a fixed fee and, if possible, would like to provide comments on its design.

Grid Planning Inputs

1. **Municipalities would like access to aggregated data for neighborhoods or other smaller geographies.**

Municipalities are interested in accessing and understanding data to aid community planning decisions. Current publicly available data is difficult to use for planning decisions below the substation level. Some stakeholders noted that it is difficult to understand grid capacity in their communities with the data that is available. Stakeholders suggested making the following data accessible to municipalities:

- Neighborhood level peak demand data and transformer capacities for residential building development
- User-friendly hosting capacity maps at the street level/real time data.
- Comprehensive database of EV chargers and heat pumps
- Data portals such as load serving capacity on feeder line

- Community dashboard for grid upgrades
- More granular data from sensors and smart meters

2. **Stakeholders are concerned about implementation challenges related to building decarbonization.**

Municipal stakeholders mentioned challenges related to outdated building codes, conflicts where time of use (TOU) rates might result in heat pumps operating at levels inconsistent with health codes, refrigerant availability, and challenges with heat pump equipment not functioning during a cold-snap period.

3. **Stakeholders would like to know more about resilience planning for climate challenges like flooding and extreme heat.**

Municipal stakeholders are interested in understanding the actions that Massachusetts is taking to address climate-driven challenges, actions that EDCs are taking to address resilience, and the way that those actions affect municipalities. One stakeholder suggested that the GMAC should include a resilience expert in its membership.

4. **Municipalities are looking for additional information on how Massachusetts grid planning addresses equity, including ensuring smaller communities aren't left behind and that communities with more limited capacity are still able to engage in grid planning.**

Stakeholders noted that some municipalities are not prepared for the current grid, let alone the future grid. Municipalities would like clear communication from the EDCs and state in both urban and rural areas of the state. Some stakeholders would like to better understand how the EDCs are progressing the clean energy transition in an equitable way that addresses historical injustices. Municipalities want to participate in additional events like this one in other parts of the state with speakers from smaller towns.