

Online Marketplace helps bring affordable solar energy to those who need it most

The Community Power Accelerator connects developers with capital providers to move impactful solar energy projects from blueprint to reality

Consumers spend over a trillion dollars a year on energy while people with low-income face a disproportionately high energy burden and greater vulnerability to environmental damage. Community-serving solar developers are working to change that by building projects that lower energy bills, create local installation and maintenance jobs, and improve resilience. Yet for many of these developers – especially nonprofits and small businesses – accessing capital remains one of the most significant barriers to getting projects off the ground. Community-serving solar developers often struggle to secure capital, as traditional lenders perceive small or first-time projects as risky. Similarly, smaller and values-aligned capital providers often lack the experience to confidently make investments, or don't know where to find viable, impactful projects. This financing gap has long stymied renewable energy progress, especially in communities that suffer from disinvestment.

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- MATT BRENNAN, VP OF SALES, COLLECTIVESUN

CONNECTING CAPITAL WITH COMMUNITY

The Community Power Accelerator (CPA) platform was launched in 2023 to help bridge this gap. An initiative of the U.S. Department of Energy's Solar Energy Technologies Office (SETO), CPA serves as a virtual marketplace that connects community-serving solar developers with lenders, investors, and philanthropies interested in impactful renewable energy projects but lacking the infrastructure to reliably find each other.

CPA's mission is to bring meaningful benefits from solar to communities, including making electricity more affordable for Americans, while helping drive local economic development. It assists small businesses and nonprofits in developing solar

projects, which can save consumers 20% or more on their electricity bills. In addition, the program aims to expand distributed energy resources, which helps decrease the growing strain on America's electric grid, while building energy resilience and security.

To be listed on the CPA, projects must be under 5 megawatts and guarantee a "meaningful" community benefit which includes improving solar access and consumer choice; increasing affordability and household savings; ensuring reliability, resilience, and security; fostering local economic development; and supporting solar workforce and entrepreneurship. Projects range from community solar, to small microgrids, aggregations of single-family house rooftops, "commercial-scale" systems such as school rooftops, and many other community-serving distributed solar projects.

The free platform facilitates verified connections and provides other free critical resources, including a credit-ready checklist, training courses, and technical assistance. Platform development and user outreach are led by the U.S. Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). All users are vetted by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and CPA's training courses are led by University of New Hampshire's Carsey School for Impact Finance.

To date, the CPA has attracted more than 110 capital providers and close to 240 developers who have posted more than 175 projects seeking funding, representing 261 megawatts of solar capacity. This growing pipeline means more developers gain training and technical assistance to become "investment-ready," and more capital providers get a curated selection of vetted, mission-aligned projects.

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Community Solar Garden under construction in Lake Elmo, MN.

The CPA offers a low-risk, high-impact entry point into solar finance. Capital providers gain a passive origination channel—where developers approach them—and can use the platform’s resources to evaluate projects for early opportunity qualifications. “This is a free tool that allows capital providers to find impactful, local projects without having to navigate the solar space on their own,” one CPA team member explained. “You can plug in, connect with aligned organizations, and see your capital do real, measurable good.”

A CPA SUCCESS STORY: THE LAKE ELMO SOLAR GARDEN

One of those measurable outcomes can be found just outside St. Paul, Minnesota. There, Cooperative Energy Futures (CEF), a member-owned solar developer, was preparing to build the Lake Elmo Community Solar Garden, a 1.2-megawatt project designed to serve residents of a local manufactured home park and other households with low-income.

The project promised significant benefits: participating families would see 10–20% lower electricity bills over 25 years and an estimated 200 households would gain access to affordable energy once the garden was fully subscribed. But noble intent alone couldn’t finance a multi-million-dollar solar installation. By 2023, the Lake Elmo project had cleared permitting and was construction-ready – yet a crucial funding gap remained. Traditional banks were wary: a relatively small project serving mobile-home park residents didn’t fit their usual lending models. Facing a potential dead end, CEF turned to the CPA platform. “We connected with CPA at the program’s launch,” said Charlie Rybak, CEF’s COO. “We were excited by the opportunity to engage with other mission-aligned solar developers and funders. The platform helped us build relationships and access resources to scale our impact.”

The CPA connection paid off. CEF connected with CollectiveSun, a California-based financier that specializes in nonprofit and mission-driven solar projects. “We saw CPA as a valuable way to find impactful projects we might not otherwise discover,” said Matt Brennan, CollectiveSun’s vice president of sales. “It bridged the gap between values-aligned capital and community developers.”

After learning about the Lake Elmo project through CPA, CollectiveSun agreed to provide a \$2.3 million loan needed for construction. The investment allowed CEF to proceed with installation and begin serving households. “If not for CPA, this project would not have happened,” Brennan said. “We wouldn’t have found CEF, and they wouldn’t have found us.”

CollectiveSun, for its part, saw the deal as a perfect fulfillment of its mission. “This project aligns with why we created our solar fund – to remove financing barriers for community solar serving those who need it most,” noted Brennan. “CPA essentially pre-screened and prepared the project, which gave us confidence. It created a space where a cooperative like CEF and an investor like us could find each other and quickly forge a deal.”

Thanks to this partnership, the Lake Elmo Community Solar Garden is now poised to serve hundreds of households with locally produced renewable energy. This case illuminates a powerful model – and it’s not a one-off. CPA has enabled more than 270 connection requests so far – each representing a potential deal or collaboration.

As more mission-driven capital providers look to accelerate the financing and construction of distributed solar systems, vehicles like CPA offer a tangible way forward. The platform channels capital to where it can do the most good, driving a surge in reliable, affordable, job-creating energy in communities across the country – one connection at a time.

Learn more about the CPA and how to join at communitypower.energy.gov.