

# An Analysis of Customer Comments from MGE's Community Energy Conversation Surveys

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In 2015, Madison Gas & Electric nearly doubled the mandatory fixed fees charged to MGE's residential electric customers, accompanied by a decrease in the energy rate per kilowatt hour, with plans to double that fixed fee again in 2016. This new rate structure raised the bills of low-energy users while decreasing those of high-energy users, not only discouraging energy conservation, but making it much harder for people on low incomes to pay and control the size of their utility bills. After considerable community protest regarding this rate change, MGE hired the consulting firm Justice and Sustainability Associates (JSA) to help implement and design a "consensus-building project that would provide multi-stakeholder guidance and inform the company's efforts to become the Community Energy Company of the Future." This project included a written survey about customer energy priorities and the company's future goals that was distributed in two ways: on paper after the 98 community focus groups led by JSA throughout the Greater Madison area between July and November 2015 (total surveys returned = 360) and online for those who were interested in giving feedback but unable or unwilling to attend the focus groups (total surveys returned = 60). For more details about the focus groups and surveys and who participated in them, see JSA's report released on 12/18/15 at <http://www.jsallc.com/mge/community-energy-conversations/>

On this survey and elsewhere, a number of participants expressed concern that many of the fixed-choice survey questions were biased or did not allow them to respond as they would have wanted. This left the open-ended comment sections of the survey as the only place in which all respondents had an opportunity to clearly indicate their priorities and concerns. The JSA report provides a complete list of all responses to its open-ended survey questions, but it does not attempt to categorize or quantify those responses in any way, making it unclear how many respondents shared particular goals or concerns when allowed to say anything they wanted. **In order to provide more clarity on what MGE customers really think about MGE's energy services and choices, this report shows the results of a quantitative analysis of MGE survey comments related to customer priorities and concerns.** The authors are a professional program evaluator with years of experience coding and quantifying survey comments and an environmental planner who served on the Wisconsin Public Service Commission.

## Coding protocol and database notes:

All comments were cut and pasted from JSA's online report and were responses to four open-ended survey questions:

Q7: List the three most important issues you would recommend MGE consider when designing its next long-term community energy plan.

Q11: Share any other energy services you feel should be offered.

Q12: Share any other objectives that are important for MGE to consider.

Q13: Is there anything else you would like MGE to know?

For Question 7, lines numbered 1, 2, 3 followed the question, although it's unclear whether respondents filled those slots in rank-order or simply wrote suggestions as they occurred to them. Given this uncertainty, counts of coded data for that question were made without regard to the line on which the comment was entered. Because the types of responses given across all 4 questions were very similar, the same set of codes wound up being used for the entire set. Coding for all questions was dynamic, with additions made to the codes as new concepts emerged and overarching

codes created as the utility of combining some concepts became evident. In some cases, a commenter mentioned multiple topics in one comment space. In these cases, the different topics in the comment were placed on different lines and coded separately. For in-session surveys, a few comments were exact repeats of an adjacent comment in the JSA database and may be transcription errors, but because this could not be ascertained (people who came together may have chosen to write the exact same thing), both comments were retained and coded.

All comment coding was done in Microsoft Excel by the two authors, with one initially coding Q7 and developing the primary set of codes, and the other coding Q11-13 using the same set of codes with some modifications that were discussed between them. Each author then reviewed all of the other's coded comments and made suggestions for alternate codes when they disagreed with the original code. Coding disagreements were resolved through discussion so that each comment was left with one consensus code.

The comments for each question were sorted by their final code, and the number of comments getting each code was counted. JSA's database provided sequential numbers before each response to each open-ended question, but these numbers merely referenced the order of the comment in that subsection, so there were no unique ID#s that would allow us to see which responses across the various comment sections belonged to the same respondent. However, JSA *did* note how many people provided comments for each question, and that number was used as the denominator to calculate the percentage of all people who responded to a question in a similar way. **This gave us two ways of calculating frequency distributions for people's comments: (1) the percentage of all comments coded for that question that got the same code/made the same suggestion, and (2) the percentage of respondents to that question whose comment got the same code/made the same suggestion.**

The pages that follow show the final set of 26 codes that were used to categorize the open-ended survey responses, followed by frequency distributions that show what % of comments and what % of respondents said each thing. **The most weight should be given to the distribution for Q7, because that is the question on which respondents were asked to name their top 3 priorities and it had by far the greatest number of responses. On that page, we summarize the top five things that survey respondents want MGE to take into consideration in planning their energy future.** Q11-13 were essentially "what else" questions that occurred toward the end of the survey, and each gets its own frequency distribution. However, because the responses to all four questions were very similar, we also calculated a *combined* frequency distribution that shows the % of comments across all four questions that got the same code/said the same thing. (A percentage of respondents for that combined distribution cannot be calculated because we have no way of knowing how many unique people responded across the four different questions.)

The Excel file containing all comments and the codes they were given may be seen on request.

Final set of 26 codes: (In the list below, related codes are adjacent where possible)

- Clean/renewable: Shift to sustainable/renewable energy sources (solar, wind), transition away from fossil fuels, reduce carbon emissions, and/or protect the environment and people's health.
- Distr-source incentives: Net-metering and other supports for distributed power generation— i.e., homeowners & groups who want to generate their own power via solar or wind and sell excess to the grid.
- Usage-based rates: Requests to reduce/not raise the fixed charge and/or to raise the kWh charge in a graduated fashion so those who use more pay more per kWh. Also, requests for price incentives for conservation/efficiency that don't specify net-metering.
- Help low-income: Progressive income-based rate structures, subsidies or other cost supports for low-income customers; more compassionate connection/reconnection fees & policies or other non-specified support for low-income users.
- Peak load pricing: Peak load pricing/time-of-use rates so those who use power at high demand times pay more.
- Equity: Requests to make energy costs or access more equitable, without specifying how or what that meant.
- Affordable: Requests to reduce energy costs to consumers, with no group preference or pricing structure suggested.
- Customer service: Improve responsiveness to customers, service speed, and explanations of bills and payment options.
- Reliability: Maintain reliable energy delivery to all users.
- Security: Protect grid from hacking and other security threats.
- Efficiency: Making MGE's production and transmission of energy more efficient, including use of co-generation and grid improvements.
- Smart grid: Smart meters, smart appliances, and other technology allowing consumers and grid operators to see usage & cost changes, reduce peak load and conserve energy.
- Conservation ed/support: Educating & assisting various groups of consumers about how to conserve energy and reduce energy costs.
- General energy ed: Other requests for education not focused on conservation.
- Communication/transparency: Communicate honestly and transparently with all stakeholders about what MGE is considering, what the options, constraints and costs are, and why decisions are made.
- Community partnership: Include community leaders and consumers *of all backgrounds* in decisions; really use their feedback & solicit their help in making improvements and innovating.
- Inclusiveness: Make MGE administration more inclusive & diverse in terms of ethnicity and culture.
- Beyond English: Translate or simplify materials and communications for non-native English speakers. When using terms from other cultures, use them correctly.
- People vs profit: Balance needs of customers and community with profits & needs of shareholders.
- Restructure utility: Restructure MGE as a non-profit public utility or a B corporation.
- Forward thinking: Be progressive, plan for the long term, and be a leader in innovation. Be prepared for and willing to change, even if investments in outdated technologies are stranded.
- Political context: Requests for carbon taxes or other policies that go beyond what MGE has control over. Complaints about politics, relationship with PSC.
- Nuclear: Comments focused on use of nuclear, either for or against.
- Jobs: Create new jobs in energy sector.
- Focus group fdbk: Feedback about improving the focus groups/community conversations.
- Misc: Comments that were hard to interpret or concerned a topic only one or two people raised.

How often each comment type was made in response to each question:

The frequency distributions below show how many comments were made about each topic in response to that question, what percentage that was of the total number of comments made, and what percentage of all commenters (on paper and online) said that.

**Q7: List the three most important issues you would recommend MGE consider when designing its next long-term community energy plan.**

<u>Code</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>rank</u>	<u>% of all comments (#/1027)</u>	<u>% of all who commented (#/390)</u>
Clean/renewable	281	1	27.4%	72.1%
Usage-based rates	104	2	10.1%	26.7%
Conservation ed/support	87	3	8.5%	22.3%
Communication/transparency	80	4	7.8%	20.5%
Affordable	66	5	6.4%	16.9%
Distr-source incentives	59	6	5.7%	15.1%
Community partnership	55	7	5.4%	14.1%
Help low-income	43	8	4.2%	11.0%
Forward thinking	37	9	3.6%	9.5%
Reliability	21	10	2.0%	5.4%
People vs profit	20	11	1.9%	5.1%
Customer service	16	12	1.6%	4.1%
Equity	15	13	1.5%	3.8%
Smart grid	14	14	1.4%	3.6%
General energy ed	13	15	1.3%	3.3%
Inclusiveness	12	16	1.2%	3.1%
Restructure utility	12	16	1.2%	3.1%
Political context	11	18	1.1%	2.8%
Peak load pricing	10	19	1.0%	2.6%
Focus group fdbk	9	20	0.9%	2.3%
Security	4	21	0.4%	1.0%
Jobs	4	21	0.4%	1.0%
Beyond English	3	23	0.3%	0.8%
Efficiency	2	24	0.2%	0.5%
Nuclear	2	24	0.2%	0.5%
<i>Misc: multiple topics</i>	47		4.6%	12.1%

**From this frequency distribution, we see that the 4 most-common recommendations from MGE customers were:**

(1) 72.1% of all 390 people who commented requested greater investment in clean/renewable energy and/or less use of fossil fuels as one of their 3 possible comments (27.4% of all 1023 comments).

(2) 26.7% of all commenters requested usage-based rates (lower fixed rates and/or higher kWh charges) as one of their 3 possible comments (10.1% of all comments).

(3) 22.3% of all commenters requested education/support for customer conservation efforts as one of their 3 possible comments (8.5% of all comments).

(4) 20.5% of all commenters requested better communication and more transparency from MGE as one of their 3 possible comments (7.8% of all comments).

**Q11: Share any other energy services you feel should be offered:**

<u>Code</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>rank</u>	<u>% of comments</u> <u>(#/112)</u>	<u>% of all who commented</u> <u>(#/100)</u>
Distr-source incentives	27	1	24.1%	27.0%
Conservation ed/support	18	2	16.1%	18.0%
Clean/renewable	15	3	13.4%	15.0%
Usage-based rates	11	4	9.8%	11.0%
Community partnership	6	5	5.4%	6.0%
Help low-income	5	6	4.5%	5.0%
General energy ed	5	6	4.5%	5.0%
Communication/transparency	5	6	4.5%	5.0%
Smart grid	4	9	3.6%	4.0%
Reliability	3	10	2.7%	3.0%
Peak load pricing	2	11	1.8%	2.0%
Nuclear	2	11	1.8%	2.0%
Customer service	1	13	0.9%	1.0%
Efficiency	1	13	0.9%	1.0%
Inclusiveness	1	13	0.9%	1.0%
Restructure utility	1	13	0.9%	1.0%
<i>Misc: multiple topics</i>	5		4.5%	5.0%

**Q12: Share any other objectives that are important for MGE to consider.**

<u>Code</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>rank</u>	<u>% of comments</u> <u>(#/219)</u>	<u>% of all who commented</u> <u>(#/181)</u>
Clean/renewable	37	1	16.9%	20.4%
Communication/transparency	26	2	11.9%	14.4%
Conservation ed/support	23	3	10.5%	12.7%
Usage-based rates	19	4	8.7%	10.5%
Distr-source incentives	17	5	7.8%	9.4%
Forward thinking	14	6	6.4%	7.7%
Help low-income	12	7	5.5%	6.6%
Community partnership	11	8	5.0%	6.1%
Political context	10	9	4.6%	5.5%
Restructure utility	9	10	4.1%	5.0%
Inclusiveness	7	11	3.2%	3.9%
People vs profit	7	11	3.2%	3.9%
General energy ed	5	13	2.3%	2.8%
Smart grid	3	14	1.4%	1.7%
Focus group fdbk	3	14	1.4%	1.7%
Equity	2	16	0.9%	1.1%
Security	2	16	0.9%	1.1%
Peak load pricing	1	18	0.5%	0.6%
Affordable	1	18	0.5%	0.6%
Customer service	1	18	0.5%	0.6%
Reliability	1	18	0.5%	0.6%
Jobs	1	18	0.5%	0.6%
<i>Misc: multiple topics</i>	7		3.2%	3.9%

**Q13: Is there anything else you would like MGE to know?**

<u>Code</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>rank</u>	<u>% of comments</u> <u>(#/174)</u>	<u>% of all who commented</u> <u>(#/157)</u>
Usage-based rates	41	1	23.6%	26.1%
Clean/renewable	29	2	16.7%	18.5%
Focus group fdbk	16	4	9.2%	10.2%
Communication/transparency	13	5	7.5%	8.3%
Conservation ed/support	9	6	5.2%	5.7%
Help low-income	8	7	4.6%	5.1%
Political context	7	8	4.0%	4.5%
Distr-source incentives	5	9	2.9%	3.2%
Community partnership	5	9	2.9%	3.2%
People vs profit	5	9	2.9%	3.2%
Forward thinking	4	12	2.3%	2.5%
Customer service	3	13	1.7%	1.9%
Beyond English	3	13	1.7%	1.9%
Restructure utility	3	13	1.7%	1.9%
Security	2	16	1.1%	1.3%
Peak load pricing	1	17	0.6%	0.6%
Affordable	1	17	0.6%	0.6%
Reliability	1	17	0.6%	0.6%
<i>Misc: multiple topics</i>	18	3	10.3%	11.5%

**Frequency table across Questions 7, 11, 12 and 13 combined:**

<u>Code</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>rank</u>	<u>% of all comments</u> <u>(#/1532)</u>
Clean/renewable	362	1	23.6%
Usage-based rates	175	2	11.4%
Conservation ed/support	137	3	8.9%
Communication/transparency	124	4	8.1%
Distr-source incentives	108	5	7.0%
Community partnership	77	6	5.0%
Help low-income	68	7	4.4%
Affordable	68	7	4.4%
Forward thinking	55	9	3.6%
People vs profit	32	10	2.1%
Political context	28	11	1.8%
Focus group fdbk	28	11	1.8%
Reliability	26	13	1.7%
Restructure utility	25	14	1.6%
General energy ed	23	15	1.5%
Customer service	21	16	1.4%
Smart grid	21	16	1.4%
Inclusiveness	20	18	1.3%
Equity	17	19	1.1%
Peak load pricing	14	20	0.9%
Security	8	21	0.5%
Beyond English	6	22	0.4%
Jobs	5	23	0.3%
Nuclear	4	24	0.3%
Efficiency	3	25	0.2%
<i>Misc: multiple topics</i>	77		5.0%