



Municipal Utility Advocacy Resource Guide

*A Practical Guide for Community-Driven
Public Power*

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Developed for the Our Cleveland Public Power Coalition by the Initiative for Energy Justice

Cleveland Public Power - Your Municipal Utility Legacy & Leverage Points

Cleveland's Public Power History: A Foundation for Justice

Cleveland Public Power represents one of the most significant victories for community control over corporate power in American history. Founded in 1907 by Progressive Era Mayor Tom L. Johnson, CPP was created to prevent private monopolies from exploiting residents with high rates.¹

Historic Victory

In 1978, 31-year-old Mayor Dennis Kucinich refused to sell the utility to Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company (CEI), despite pressure from six banks that forced the city into default.² This historic stand has saved Cleveland residents over \$300 million and preserved community ownership of this essential service.³

Understanding Your Municipal Utility Advantage

Municipal utilities like Cleveland Public Power operate under fundamentally different governance structures than investor-owned utilities, creating unique opportunities for community influence and democratic control.

Governance Structure	Municipal Utilities	Investor-Owned Utilities
Ownership	Community-owned through local government	Private shareholders
Primary Goal	Serve community needs	Maximize shareholder profits
Regulatory Oversight	Local government (Mayor/City Council)	State Public Utility Commission
Rate Setting	City council ordinance process	Formal PUC proceedings
Community Access	Direct access to decision-makers	Regulated proceeding participation
Decision Timeline	Often months	Often years

Cleveland Public Power: Your Advocacy Pathway

Decision-Making Structure

Mayor	City Council	CPP Commissioner
Appoints CPP Commissioner and Department of Public Utilities Director	Approves budgets, rates, and major policy changes through ordinances	Day-to-day operational oversight

Key Influence Points

City Council Utilities Committee – Monthly hearings with public comment

Full City Council Meetings – Ordinance votes requiring public hearings (check current schedule at clevelandcitycouncil.org)

Mayor's Budget Process – Annual budget development (typically Feb-May)

Community Input Sessions – Informal opportunities for direct dialogue

Ohio-Specific Advantages

Municipal utilities in Ohio are exempt from Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) regulation, meaning faster decision-making and greater local control compared to utilities like FirstEnergy.⁴

Why This Matters for Advocacy

- **Community-Driven Governance** – Meaningful community input into CPP decision-making
- **Affordable Service** – Permanent lifeline programs and payment plan consistency
- **Clean Energy Transition** – Community-owned solar and energy efficiency programs
- **Reliable Infrastructure** – Equitable investment across all neighborhoods, particularly the East Side

Historical Leverage

Kucinich's 1978 stand demonstrates that community organizing can defeat corporate power. Our CPP coalition continues this legacy by demanding that public ownership translate into genuine community benefit and democratic control.

Community Advisory Boards - Completing the Public Power Vision

Learning from CPP's History: From Corporate Resistance to Community Control

The 1978 struggle revealed that public ownership alone isn't enough - communities need ongoing mechanisms to ensure democratic control. Corporate interests used bank pressure and media campaigns to nearly destroy CPP.⁵ Today's challenge is different, ensuring that public ownership serves all Cleveland residents, particularly those in majority-Black neighborhoods facing the highest energy burdens.

Advisory Board Models in Other Municipalities

Austin Energy Electric Utility Commission (Texas)

- **Structure:** 11-member advisory board appointed by the Austin City Council⁶
- **Authority:** Reviews and analyzes all policies and procedures of the electric utility, including the electric rate structure, fuel costs and charges, customer services, capital investments, new generation facilities, selection of types of fuel, budget, strategic planning, regulatory compliance, and billing procedures⁷
- **Function:** Active participation in the resource planning process, including the 2035 Plan
- **Meetings:** Second Monday of each month, unless otherwise determined by the commission⁸
- **Cleveland Application:** Could address CPP's lack of transparent community input mechanisms

Seattle City Light Review Panel (Washington)

- **Structure:** 9-member panel drawn from among City Light's customers⁹
- **Function:** Reviews and assesses City Light's strategic plan and provides opinions to the Mayor and City Council¹⁰
- **Appointment:** Five members nominated by the mayor, four by the city council, serving staggered three-year terms¹¹
- **Accountability:** The Panel provides formal recommendations on strategic plans and utility performance
- **Cleveland Application:** Could provide oversight of CPP's infrastructure and strategic planning needs

Sacramento Municipal Utility District (California) - Comprehensive Community Engagement Model

- **Governance Structure:** 7-member elected Board of Directors representing geographic "wards" with 4-year terms¹²
- **Direct Democracy:** Customer-owners elect board members who establish policies and long-term direction¹³
- **Community Impact Plan:** Developed in 2022 through extensive listening sessions with under-resourced customers to ensure equitable participation in the clean energy transition¹⁴
- **Sustainable Communities Program:** Focused investments in community partnerships supporting environmental equity and economic vitality¹⁵
- **Cleveland Application:** Model for comprehensive community engagement combining formal governance structures with ongoing community input mechanisms

Key SMUD Innovations for Cleveland

- **Community Listening Sessions:** SMUD held listening sessions to understand barriers and challenges that under-resourced customers face and developed a plan to bring them along in the clean energy journey¹⁶
- **Resource Mapping:** Uses interactive mapping tools to identify under-resourced communities and align investments with equity goals¹⁷
- **Democratic Governance:** Customer ownership with elected representatives provides a proven framework for community control

Key Organizational Allies for Our CPP

National Networks

[Climate and Community Institute](#)¹⁸

[Energy Democracy Project](#)¹⁹

Cleveland-Specific Partners

[End Poverty Now Coalition](#)²⁰

[Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless](#)²¹

[Cleveland Owns](#)²²

Community organizations in high energy burden neighborhoods

Municipal Networks

[Urban Sustainability Directors Network \(USDN\)](#)²³

[American Public Power Association](#)²⁴

[Sacramento Municipal Utility District](#)²⁵

[Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy](#)²⁶

[Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education LA](#)²⁷

[AIRE](#)²⁸ (formerly RePowerLA)

Your Our CPP Action Plan - From History to Victory

Building on Cleveland's Public Power Legacy

Our CPP coalition continues this tradition by transforming public ownership into genuine community benefit. Additionally, by exploring community advisory models, Our CPP can transform Cleveland's public ownership into a model of genuine community benefit and democratic governance.

Your campaign has unique advantages: Cleveland residents have already chosen public power over corporate control, and recent FirstEnergy corruption scandals validate the public ownership model.

Potential Implementation Pathway for Cleveland

Phase 1: Foundation Building

- Connect with Our CPP's existing community engagement efforts
- Document community concerns to identify neighborhoods needing the most help (i.e., utilizing a community-developed criteria and mapping methodology similar to SMUD's Resource Priorities Map approach)
- Map support among City Council members for the advisory board concept, emphasizing a democratic governance model
- Build a coalition with housing justice, environmental, and neighborhood organizations using a partnership approach

Phase 2: Community Impact Plan Development

- Draft advisory board ordinance incorporating lessons from successful models
- Address CPP's specific challenges using proven frameworks or action research model: East Side reliability, shutoff equity, clean energy transition
- Implement community listening sessions to gather input on advisory board structure from affected communities
- Present the proposal at Our CPP community meetings, emphasizing proven democratic governance success

Phase 3: Implementation

- Work with council allies to pass an ordinance establishing an advisory board with clear authority and accountability
- Create recruitment and appointment processes prioritizing frontline community representation
- Establish accountability mechanisms linking the advisory board to Our CPP's vision
- Launch with a focus on immediate issues: rate policies, shutoff prevention, and equitable clean energy programs

Essential Resources for Our CPP Organizers

Building on Cleveland's Public Power Legacy

Campaign Toolkits

[Amp Up the People: A Practical Guide for Energy Justice Advocates in Utility Regulation - Initiative for Energy Justice & Vote Solar](#)

[People's Utility Justice Playbook - Energy Democracy Project](#)

[SMUD Community Impact Plan framework and listening session methodologies](#)

[Institute for Local Self-Reliance Community Power Toolkit](#)

Our CPP campaign materials and future community listening session findings

Research & Analysis

[Building Public Renewables in the United States - Climate and Community Institute](#)

[How Did the Build Public Renewables Act Get Passed? - DSA case study of successful New York campaign](#)

[SMUD's Resource Priorities Map methodology for identifying under-resourced communities](#)

[Climate Justice Alliance Energy Democracy case studies](#)

Historical Context

[Dennis Kucinich's "The Division of Light and Power" - Account of 1978 battle for public power²⁹](#)

[Encyclopedia of Cleveland History on Municipal Light and Tom L. Johnson's original vision³⁰](#)

Connect with the Movement

Join Our CPP:

Attend coalition meetings and community listening sessions

[Sign up](#) for OurCPP campaign updates and action alerts

Participate in City Council Utilities Committee meetings

Cleveland has already demonstrated that community organizing can counter corporate power and preserve public utilities. Our CPP continues this legacy by ensuring public ownership benefits all residents, particularly those in frontline communities facing the highest energy burdens.

The goal isn't just community input, it's community control over this essential public service.

Endnotes

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3. Ibid.
4. Ohio Revised Code, Title 49, Public Utilities. <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/title-49>
5. Dennis Kucinich, "The Division of Light and Power" (Hot Books, 2021).
6. "Electric Utility Commission," City of Austin, <https://www.austintexas.gov/content/electric-utility-commission>
7. Austin City Code Section 2-1-143.
8. "Electric Utility Commission," City of Austin.
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10. Seattle City Council Ordinance 123256 (March 22, 2010).
11. "Who We Are," Seattle City Light Review Panel, <https://www.seattle.gov/city-light-review-panel/who-we-are>.
12. "Board of Directors," Sacramento Municipal Utility District, <https://www.smud.org/Corporate/About-us/Company-Information/Board-of-Directors>
13. Ibid.
14. "Making an impact where it matters most," SMUD 2022 Annual Report, <https://www.smud.org/Corporate/About-us/Company-Information/Reports-and-Statements/2022-Annual-Report/Making-an-impact-where-it-matters-most>
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20. End Poverty Now Coalition, <https://plainpress.blog/2020/02/06/end-poverty-now-coalition-raises-concerns-about-cleveland-public-powers-business-practices-and-shutoffs/>
21. Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless, Moratorium on Shut-offs, <https://www.neoch.org/cleveland-homeless-blog/2020/12/2/as-moratoriums-end-need-grows-for-utility-assistance>
22. Cleveland Owns, <https://www.clevelandowns.coop/>
23. Urban Sustainability Directors Network, <https://www.usdn.org/index.html#/>
24. "Community Engagement," American Public Power Association. <https://www.publicpower.org/topic/community-engagement>
25. "In Our Community", Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD), <https://www.smud.org/In-Our-Community>
26. "Our Vision and History," Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, <https://laane.org/vision/>; "LAANE - Building a new economy that works for everyone," <https://laane.org/>.
27. "Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education," <https://scopela.org/>; "Utility Debt Forgiveness NOW At LADWP," SCOPE, <https://scopela.org/utility-debt-forgiveness-now-at-ladwp/>.
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This resource was developed by the Initiative for Energy Justice in partnership with the Our CPP coalition. Cleveland's 1978 victory over corporate control provides the foundation for today's fight for energy justice. For more resources and support, visit iejusa.org or ourcpp.org.