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Recipient Organization: Midwest Tribal Energy Resources Association, Inc.
(MTERA)

Project Title: Establishment of an Intertribal Technical Energy Providers
Network

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2. Executive Summary:

The Midwest Tribal Energy Resources Association (MTERA) embarked on a 5-year (extended to 7-year) initiative aimed at advancing Tribal energy resilience and sustainability through intertribal collaboration. By bringing together Tribes in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan (EPA Region 5 Tribes), the project's scope encompassed organizational growth, governance and management formalization and enhancement, and the planning and deployment of energy-related services to Member Tribes.

MTERA strategically pursued four key objectives to fulfill its mission:

1. Clearinghouse Development: Creation of a centralized hub offering valuable information, education, and outreach for Tribal communities and their neighbors.
2. Policy Liaison: Serving as a vital link between federal and state agencies to contribute to the formulation of inclusive energy policies that ensure both Tribal and regional energy success.
3. Energy Planning and Research: Providing essential support for energy planning, researching financing opportunities, and exploring effective procurement strategies.
4. Training Support: Facilitating training and apprenticeship initiatives to empower the Tribal workforce and enhance community capabilities.

This project significantly contributes to the Tribe/Tribal community's energy vision by promoting Indian tribal energy development, improving energy efficiency, and reducing and stabilizing energy costs. The establishment of a clearinghouse ensures that valuable information is readily accessible, empowering Tribal communities to make informed decisions. MTERA's role as a policy liaison enhances the Tribe's influence in shaping comprehensive energy policies, fostering a conducive environment for sustainable energy practices. Through energy planning, research, and training support, the project directly strengthens Tribal energy and economic infrastructure, aligning with the broader vision of enhancing electrification and bringing reliable power to Indian land and homes for the benefit of tribal members.

The Department of Energy (DOE) funding played a pivotal role in transforming MTERA from a small, informal group to a thriving nonprofit organization representing 23 Member Tribes. This growth underscores the success of the project in achieving its objectives and contributing significantly to the Tribe/Tribal community's energy vision.

3. Project Objectives:

MTERA is committed "to bring energy opportunity to Midwest Tribes that advances energy policy and development by leveraging resources, sharing information, gaining experience, identifying opportunities, and benefiting from real-world projects." MTERA aimed to empower Tribal governments in the Midwest to implement energy strategies that promoted a clean, responsible, sustainable, and sovereign energy future.

Limited financial resources often prevents Tribes from doing comprehensive energy assessments, implementing infrastructure improvements, or exploring renewable energy sources. The lack of technical expertise and access to up-to-date information also hinders effective decision-making in energy planning for Tribes with limited resources. Consequently, many Tribal communities find themselves caught in a cycle of reactionary planning, addressing immediate energy concerns without the capacity for strategic, forward-thinking solutions.

MTERA sought to be a solution for this issue by bringing together Tribes to overcome these challenges. Tribes working together can pool their resources, share knowledge, and collectively navigate the complex landscape of energy planning. By fostering a collaborative approach, Tribes can leverage collective expertise, benefit from shared experiences, and explore joint ventures that might be financially unattainable for individual entities.

Moreover, collaboration enables Tribes to present a unified voice when engaging with external stakeholders, including federal and state agencies and industry players. This unity increases Tribal influence in shaping energy policies that better align with the unique needs and aspirations of Tribal communities.

MTERA's high-level objectives were to:

1. Develop a clearinghouse to provide useful information, education, and outreach for Tribal communities and their neighbors.
2. Be a liaison assisting federal and state agencies in the creation of comprehensive energy policy that assured Tribal and regional energy success.
3. Support energy planning, provide research for financing opportunities, and investigate procurement strategies.
4. Support training or apprenticeship initiatives.

Specific targets and milestones related to these goals included:

- (1) build the organization through increased memberships and partnerships,
- (2) provide technical assistance to member-Tribes,
- (3) recommend strategies to optimize energy production and decrease energy use for its Member-Tribes, and
- (4) liaise with federal and state agencies in the creation of energy policy that ensured Tribal and regional energy success.

Under the DOE-funded project, MTERA sought to:

1. Develop the organization, increase membership, and become a service-oriented partner.
2. Support the development of an energy baseline for all Member-Tribes.
3. Encourage a common goal for a nominal reduction of 25% by 2025.
4. Act as an energy advisor for Member-Tribes by providing assistance with energy audits, feasibility studies, and long-term planning.
5. Provide technical and policy recommendations.
6. Seek the services and advice of its partners to facilitate these activities.

4. Description of Activities Performed:

Task #1: Organizational Development

Subtask #1.1: Staffing

Over the course of the project, MTERA took the approach of using contractors to perform the management and technical services associated with the project. MTERA conducted a competitive Request for Proposals to select a management contractor to support the initiative and hired a firm in 2017 to start formalizing the organization. In 2020, MTERA's leadership decided to switch the management contracting firm, because of staffing changes at the original contractor.

As MTERA looks to the future, the organization is in conversations about starting to bring on more staff now that the organization has formal policies and more funding to support personnel.

Subtask #1.2: Communications and Events Plan

This project has enhanced MTERA's online presence and outreach through various platforms. MTERA launched a website that offers valuable tools and resources for Member Tribes and other stakeholders interested in energy-related topics. The website features updated news, insights, project profiles, funding opportunities, and events. It also showcases MTERA's mission, vision, and goals to attract new members and partners. The website has generated many inquiries, subscriptions, and memberships for MTERA.

The website can be viewed here: www.mtera.org

MTERA also created a new Information Hub for its members. This cloud-based platform provides access to information on board meetings, motions and actions, contracts, energy resources, and more. It facilitates information sharing and collaboration among MTERA's growing network.

Moreover, MTERA has organized annual conferences and semi-annual virtual gatherings to engage with the Tribal energy community. Many of these events are done in partnership with other entities working on Tribal energy. The average attendance for MTERA's annual conference was more than 150 people in the past three years.

Subtask #1.3: Sustainability Plan

MTERA needed to develop a plan to remain financially-sustainable beyond the DOE grant. In 2020, the organization developed a strategic plan and associated financial sustainability plan and has been pursuing the strategy outlined in the plan ever since, to great success.

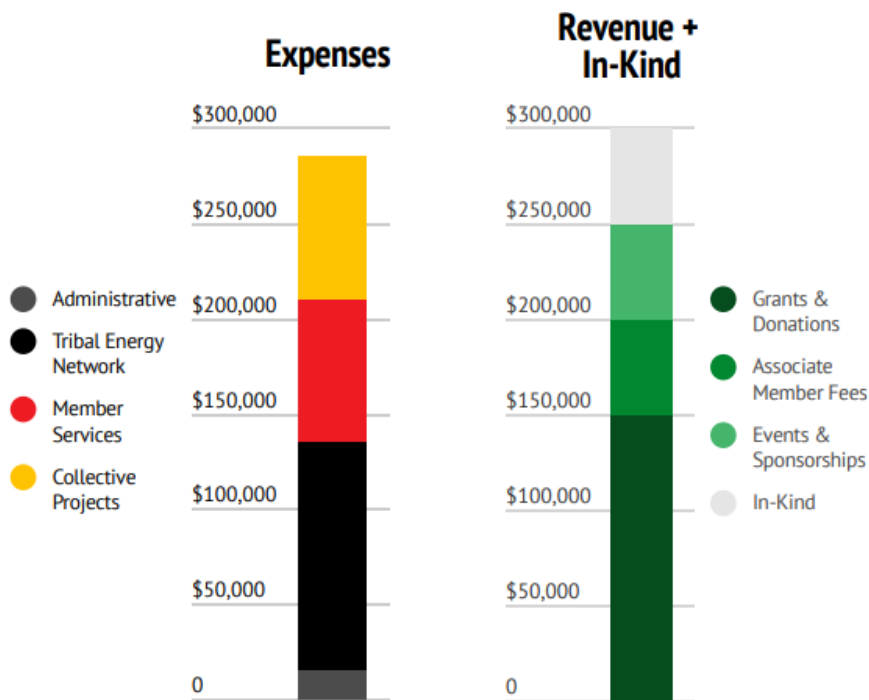
The strategic plan and associated financial plan can be found here: <https://www.mtera.org/strategic-plan>

Because of the revenue uncertainty beyond the DOE grant, MTERA has planned for a range of scenarios. These span from a "lean" year where MTERA has minimal external funding, to "successful" years where MTERA has received a significant amount of grant, foundation, and partner funding. These scenarios are summarized below:

1 "Lean" This scenario focuses on the mandatory budget items to keep the organization up-and-running	2 "Target" This scenario summarizes the best estimate budget items based on MTERA's historical costs and future plans.	3 "Success" This scenario provides a cost breakdown for a the scenario where MTERA is successful at securing significant external funding.
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The target revenue sources and disposition of expenses is illustrated below.

Target breakdown of expenses and revenue from 2020 financial sustainability plan:



Since approving the plan, MTERA has secured approximately 3-4x the target funding defined in the plan and therefore has more resources to support Member Tribes compared to the 2020 plan.

Subtask #1.4: Necessary Education

Empowering Tribal Energy Champions with information and a network of qualified experts is central to MTERA's mission. The examples below show some of the efforts that MTERA has engaged in over the past several years under the objective of education and training:

MTERA received a grant from the Solar Energy Technologies Office in collaboration with NREL. The grant aims to help stakeholders overcome the regulatory, jurisdictional, and policy barriers that hinder solar development projects on Tribal lands. This grant enables MTERA to provide education and capacity building for Tribes in this area.

MTERA also engages with regional partners to offer energy planning and execution education for its Members. MTERA disseminates information about relevant education opportunities that can support the advancement of energy opportunities for member-Tribes through various channels, such as Board meetings, email, and MTERA's website.

Furthermore, MTERA worked with energy training and nonprofit board governance training providers to enhance the skills and knowledge of its Board Members. MTERA believes strong organizational governance and management is critical for the organization and its ability to provide technical assistance throughout the region – especially in such a dynamic funding landscape.

MTERA has also hired Pilar Thomas from Quarles & Brady to provide regular updates to Tribal Energy Champions on the current funding opportunities and policy issues that affect Tribes. The regular updates give an overview of the situation, while separate meetings are arranged to discuss specific funding opportunities, policy issues, or related topics in more detail.

Task #2: Energy Baseline

MTERA worked with external consultants to provide various energy baseline services to Tribes. These solutions had varying levels of success and, in general, MTERA felt that it was very hard to provide a useful tool that could be updated regularly without significant time needed from Tribal staff. One such solution MTERA pursued was WeGoWise, which was an automated energy bill tracking software that MTERA offered to Tribes. Some Tribes found this tool useful, but many have stopped using it since providing it for free for one year to any Tribe that didn't already have an energy tracking software solution.

Task #3: Energy Resource Assessments

Subtask #3.1: Member-Tribe Resources

MTERA provided flexible member Tribe resources to support the scoping of energy projects. This included resource assessments and feasibility analyses associated with energy conversions. The approach MTERA took to launch these projects was to empower the Tribal Energy Champions to define specifically what their respective Tribe needed to advance planning efforts, and then MTERA supported the competitive RFP and matchmaking with a qualified vendor.

MTERA successfully launched several Member resource projects for Leech Lake, Oneida, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. These are described more in the 2020 Strategic Plan and on MTERA's website.

Subtask #3.2: Cooperative Opportunities

MTERA competitively selected Burns & McDonnell (B&M) to perform an evaluation of cooperative opportunities in the electric and natural gas industries. MTERA used a competitive bidding process according to its procurement policy.

This cooperative study evaluated joint strategies for the purchasing and generation of electricity in the Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) market. Furthermore, it looked at whether there is an economic opportunity for Tribes to cooperative on the purchase and distribution of natural gas to facilities on Reservation.

B&M finished their report in early 2022 and reviewed it with MTERA Member Tribes.

In addition to exploring collaborative opportunities in the electric and natural gas industries, MTERA selected Capacity Consulting to perform an evaluation of the opportunity for MTERA Tribes to cooperate on the bulk purchasing and distribution of propane.

The Capacity Consulting report was finalized and is located on MTERA's Info Hub.

Task #4: Feasibility Assessment

Subtask #4.1: Project Feasibility

MTERA provided flexible feasibility studies to meaningfully advance each Tribe's energy planning and deployment efforts. These feasibility studies covered a broad array of topics, from biomass, propane, natural gas, and renewables. All of the feasibility studies were requested by Member Tribes using a standardized form that facilitated equitable distribution of DOE funding. All feasibility projects were reviewed and approved by the board of directors.

Subtask #4.2: Cooperative Feasibility

The cooperative feasibility studies performed by B&M and Capacity Consulting explored resource availability and project economics related to Tribes collaborating in the electric and propane markets, respectively.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations:

MTERA, through the support of the DOE grant, is now the largest intertribal nonprofit dedicated to energy planning and deployment. The organization grew from 5 Tribes in 2016 (when the DOE grant was awarded) to 23 Tribes in 2023. This is great timing given the funding landscape and current opportunities for Tribes.

MTERA is well-positioned to provide assistance to Tribes throughout the Midwest in a financially-sustainable manner for the foreseeable future. As a result of the organizational development activities associated with the DOE grant, including the financial sustainability plan, MTERA has a solid strategy for fundraising and keeping the organization thriving well into the future.

MTERA has developed the ability to pursue collaborative initiatives like the Solar For All grant. One of the most important achievements of MTERA is being able to lead large, regional coalitions of Tribes for the myriad of federal funding opportunities. Three recent examples include the Economic Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers (TCTACs), EPA Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) Planning consortium of 8 Tribes in the Midwest, and the recent Solar For All application that MTERA submitted in partnership with GRID Alternatives, Native CDFI Network, the Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy, and UW Madison. The DOE grant was critical to developing MTERA's organizational capacity to take a lead role on these initiatives.

MTERA is a leading voice in Tribal energy policy and regulatory efforts, including the Tribal Solar Initiative. Because of our strong governance and direct line of communication with Tribal Energy Champions, we have been able to efficiently get the voice of Tribes heard when it comes to important topics that affect Tribal clean energy projects. One recent example is the Tribal Solar Initiative. This 3-year effort resulted in a guidebook and educational resources being developed for Tribes, utilities, regulators, and private industry. The result of this effort can be found here: <https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy23osti/85741.pdf>

MTERA is supporting Tribes to plan, fund, and deploy clean energy projects. Important during this time of significant federal funding for Tribal energy projects, MTERA has a well-defined process and approach for how we empower Tribal Energy Champions and provide value to Member Tribes. This DOE grant was critical to giving our organization the time and funding runway to figure out what works and what doesn't work. Now, we are a well-oiled machine when it comes to understanding our Member Tribes' needs, providing solutions/offerings to advance Tribal energy projects and building up Tribal capacity to plan, fund, and deploy clean energy solutions across Midwest Tribes.

MTERA has a strong governance structure and is advising other regional intertribal groups seeking to form similar regional energy organizations. Strong governance and management are crucial to being able to adapt to different industry and market paradigms. When MTERA started, there was limited funding for Tribal energy projects. Currently, there is significant funding available that is overwhelming for most Tribes. Having strong governance and management allows us to adapt MTERA's service to the current funding and policy landscape (which will inevitably change).

6. Lessons Learned

Tribal Energy Champions are the key to MTERA's success. Tribes that have a strong track record of planning and deploying Tribal clean energy projects often have one thing in common: there is a person or group of people within the Tribe that have the capacity to “carry the weight” of energy initiatives. MTERA recognizes this and our core approach is to empower these “Tribal Energy Champions” at each of our Member Tribes. Tribal Energy Champions are the core audience for the strategies and services MTERA deploys and they are also the key decision makers for the organization by serving in a governance role on the board of directors. As Tribes now face a favorable funding landscape for Tribal energy projects, these Tribal Energy Champions are critical to ensuring their respective Tribes take advantage of the funding that is out there. This can be an incredibly time consuming task. MTERA plays an important role in trying to make the firehose of resources more accessible to Tribes via Tribal Energy Champions.

As MTERA grew, it became harder to reach consensus on certain decisions. While MTERA has always been and will continue to be a consensus-driven organization, it became unrealistic to assume all Tribes could dedicated enough time to support all key decisions. In the early days of MTERA, this was achievable because there were only 5 Tribes and the volume of important decisions was manageable as a group. As MTERA grew, there were more board members that needed to be briefed on decisions and the volume of important decisions significantly increased. **The key lesson learned here was to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the Executive Committee, board members, and the management team.** Once the organization grew to more than 12 Member Tribes, it became important to have meetings with the Executive Committee to work with the management team to develop recommendations that could then be presented to the larger group of board members. Prior to advancing the role of the Executive Committee, small decisions were causing significant schedule delays and made for an overly cumbersome process to get consensus from all Tribes on all decisions.

A related lesson learned to the above challenge was to ensure flexibility in terms of what MTERA provides as solutions/services to Member Tribes. In early years, we kept getting stuck trying to standardize our offerings too much such that weren't customizing our support specific to each Tribe's needs. By changing our approach from standardized offerings to flexible offerings that could meet Tribes where they were with their energy planning and deployment efforts, we gained much more momentum to advancing our Member Tribes' energy projects.

As the organization grew, it became harder to provide meaningful support with a fixed budget because the funding was “diluted” across a larger group of Tribes. The lesson learned here was to either find scalable funding (where the funding source can grow as the organization grows) or to find initiatives or services that achieve significant economies of scale such that adding another Tribe doesn’t “take away” value from another Tribe. MTERA is fortunate to be in a strong financial position to continue to grow to provide meaningful technical and financial assistance to Tribes by leveraging grant funding and philanthropy funding.

Strong relationships with partners is crucial to securing funding, but also executing the work. Over the years, MTERA has gained the trust of funders and project partners who want to collaborate in the Midwest on energy initiatives that impact Tribes. When MTERA first started, it had no reputation and relatively few relationships at the federal, state, and regional levels. Over the past 7 years, this has become a strength of MTERA’s and is the main ingredient to having several large grants that fund MTERA’s operations beyond this DOE grant that got the organization started.