

Dealing with opposition to your project

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Unfortunately, not all members of the public will support a new renewable energy project. It's a good idea to plan ahead when it comes to handling opposition, as dealing with community conflict can take up time and resources, and potentially affect planning approvals. This article outlines the different types of objections that can arise, and offers advice for managing them to achieve the best possible outcomes for all parties.

Main topics covered in this article include:

- Types of opposition
- Addressing concerns
- Some specific opposition scenarios and tips from the experts
- Reconsidering a project
- Important things to remember
- More information

Types of opposition

Like most types of development, a new renewable energy project is likely to come up against some opposition. The two most common types of protesters are:

- organised protest groups in the wider community
- local objectors - typically landowners and residents concerned about changes to their rural landscape and lifestyle.

Organised protest groups

There are many reasons opposition groups get together to fight renewable energy developments such as a wind farm. These include:

- denial of climate change
- opposition to rising power prices
- a shared belief that wind turbines or other technologies are ugly and ruin the appearance of a landscape
- ideas that renewable energy technologies are technically flawed and only generate power intermittently, or that they don't generate as much as a conventional power station
- notions that wind turbines cause damage to wildlife including birds and bats
- a belief that wind turbines create too much noise, some of which is too low-frequency to be heard but can make animals or people ill.

Some professional protest groups may be supported by conventional energy industries, such as coal. But many are simply groups of concerned citizens who don't believe wind or solar energy is the right way forward for Australia's energy supply. Some of the larger opposition groups in Australia have websites which offer a useful insight into their side of the argument.

Recognising and addressing these issues may never convince the die-hard opposition, but giving the undecided public the facts, in local newspapers or through a newsletter, can help them make informed decisions before protest groups spread their ideas.

Local objectors

It's common and natural for people to resist change in their immediate environment. Horror stories about renewable energy published by organised protest groups can serve to confirm or increase local residents' fears about the impact that a project may have on their community. So effective community engagement is essential.

Common concerns of local objectors include:

- aesthetic changes to the landscape
- effects on local property prices
- noise issues and health effects
- damage to local wildlife.

Generally, local objectors are driven by wanting to 'protect' their surroundings, and are more likely to feel emotionally disturbed by the project than larger, more organised protest groups. If you understand the issues they want to discuss, and are prepared to listen carefully to their concerns, you're more likely to win their approval.

Addressing concerns

It's important to remember all communities are different, and there's no simple way to address all the concerns people will raise. In general, when dealing with communities, it's important to:

- start your consultations as early in the project as possible
- take a low-key approach
- remain consistent.

Providing ways for people to air concerns

Providing a forum for organised protest groups and local objectors to raise their concerns is vital in engaging with the community. You should offer plenty of ways for them to be part of the consultation process. Here are a few ideas:

- Organised information sessions and street stalls can be a good way to meet members of the community one-on-one and discuss their thoughts. An information day where members of the community can walk through at their own time, and pace and talk one-on-one with project team members is preferable to the traditional public meeting.
- Opportunities to address concerns also arise when you attend community activities and events.
- When you organise an information day, make sure your project's supporters are there. If mostly objectors are present, it won't do your project any good. It may be better to cancel a meeting than hold it without good representation from your supporters.
- Don't engage in a war of words on the local newspaper's letters page.

Considering the issues raised

When members of the community raise concerns, it's important to consider them very carefully. Try to see the issue from their point of view.

- Take the time to listen and fully understand concerns, before you respond with facts to refute them.
- Sometimes it's better to delay your response and get back to the person later. You can often build trust when you provide a more considered answer to their questions.
- Find out about local issues and politics. For example, what are farmers concerned with first and foremost?

Providing accurate information from reliable sources

Any information you provide should be accurate and come from reliable, credible sources with a good name in the community.

- Provide as much useful information as possible, but don't overwhelm people with it.
- Consider the timing of the project when you introduce information that might create fresh concerns.
- Be consistent in how you describe the project.

Some specific opposition scenarios and tips from the experts

Anger or verbal abuse over the phone

This can be a real test, but the key here is to stay calm and composed and not be drawn into an argument. Find out as much as possible about the caller and their concerns, and write it all down.

- Try to get their details, and understand where they live in relation to the wind farm.
- Try to get them to describe specific concerns.
- Ask them if they would like to be added to your contact list.

You don't necessarily need to hit back with answers – listen, and provide information if you can. After the initial call, you should follow up throughout the course of the project on any issues raised. This helps to build trust and shows you're trying to address their concerns.

If an objector does give you their details, make sure you send them every piece of communication about the project, especially invitations to events like information days. If you're considering setting up a community reference group, you may want to invite them to join. It's always better to try to work with objectors, in most cases they're part of the community too.

A local environmental group raises questions about environmental impacts

Local environmental groups are highly informed, and will have specific knowledge about the site and the flora and fauna present. If possible, try to meet these groups in person and aim to work collaboratively with them. You may want to organise an information session, which your bird and bat specialist can attend, to deal with specific concerns. Be prepared to share the methods and results of your studies, which may allay some fears about potential impacts.

Explain the background to the project, that it's a community owned project and you welcome the involvement of local environmental groups. Ways to involve these groups might include:

- providing information as part of the flora and fauna study
- conducting surveys as part of the flora and fauna study
- suggesting offsets or management measures as part of the flora and fauna study. Local groups may have practical suggestions on how to improve habitat for local species or minimise impacts during construction
- helping with the implementation of any post construction bird and bat monitoring, re-vegetation, fox-baiting or other environmental management
- having a representative on any community groups set up for the project.

Locals start putting anti-project signs up on their properties

Sometimes objectors will be highly organised and capable of mounting a professional public relations campaign against your renewable energy project.

Unfortunately there's not a lot you can do to counter this type of activism. The best approach is to continue to engage with the community, definitely don't go into hiding, but try to play it down.

Avoid planning consultation events where these groups will be able to grandstand. Opt for an informal information day over several hours rather than a public meeting with presentations.

Objectors who support one renewable source over another

"I support renewable energy, but I prefer solar", is a common response from locals, some of whom may already have solar panels installed. When you respond to this, it's useful to emphasise that we need a mix of technologies to deal with the challenge of climate change, and to move Australia towards a low carbon economy.

Reconsidering a project

Once you've reached the detailed assessment phase, it becomes hard to reconsider the type of project because of the money, time and effort already invested.

Realistically in Australia, you should expect some level of objection for a wind farm project. However, keep in mind it's meant to be a community wind farm, and if you genuinely feel that the majority of the community is not behind the project you may start to question whether to proceed.

Before you make any drastic decisions, it may be useful to conduct a public opinion survey to gather some quantitative data on support for the project. You may well find it's only a vocal minority who are opposed.

Important things to remember

1. Document your consultation. Prepare and circulate draft and final minutes for all your project meetings. Keep records of the concerns raised, and your responses. If possible, get objectors to sign off the records of any interactions.
2. Treat objectors with patience and respect, no matter how they behave. Always give them the option to abandon their objection while maintaining their dignity — and don't lose yours.
3. You may be able to engage the community by involving them in decisions about where to allocate the community support fund, or by offering a no-strings-attached bundle of shares.

Handling local objections can take a lot of time and energy. Ultimately though, it can determine whether your project goes ahead or not, and whether it will succeed in the future, so you need to do it carefully.

More information

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