



Community collaboration is the key

Wind Energy Development and Public Perception

BY JAMES A. KENT, KEVIN PREISTER, TRISH MALONE AND DAN WOOD

It is an understatement to say that wind energy development is gaining momentum. In fact, it is urgently needed as part of a suite of alternative energy futures that will contribute to freeing the world from its dependence on fossil fuels.

In recent years, public attention on wind energy has been unprecedented—from the energy plans of Al Gore to those of T. Boone Pickens; from the stimulus money for further wind development to new requirements in several states to include alternative energy development in their energy scenarios. The image of wind turbines in pastoral settings has now become a cultural icon for “green” living in our advertising and print media. The last several years have witnessed a proliferation of wind energy proposals and wind energy production around the country and in the world. Why then is there increasing opposition to wind energy development?

As with any new technology, there are unintended consequences built into the process of developing and delivering a product to market. Often lost in the excitement to move ahead are the social and cultural impacts on adjacent communities and the surrounding region that result from project site approvals for construction and transmission.

Fossil Fuel Energy Syndrome

Back in the 1970s when fossil fuel energy was being developed, the coal, oil shale and natural gas developers downplayed the consequences impacting communities and land, and often promoted the fact that they would “bring jobs” to the mostly rural areas. Most of these areas had cultures based on ranching, farming and recreational use of the land, all of which were considered a renewable economy passed on from one generation to the next. As a result, many projects were perceived by locals as extracting wealth from the land, damaging the landscape or ruining the local culture.

The companies’ plans often called for the industrialization of the extraction sites with little understanding of what that meant to the local residents. There was a common attitude that, “hardly anyone lived there, anyway,” and the energy companies were ultimately seen as outsiders. Their failure to negotiate with the local people for a long-range Community Benefits Package left a legacy of disappointment. Such an agreement would have mitigated some of the negative impacts of their projects and could have contributed to improving life for future generations.

Those projects seemed to epitomize the definition of the “externalization of social costs.” The toll that these energy projects created led to a new movement to oppose such intrusions. Buoyed by federal regulations and national and local coalitions, a formal resistance organized to oppose energy projects that were considered potentially intrusive to the social and natural environment, often after negotiations to mitigate their impacts failed. From small communities to major national movements, lawsuits and the threat of lawsuits from a network of various advocacy groups grew to fight these industrialization projects, especially those that were perceived as potentially harmful to the social and physical environment within which they were located.

Public Resistance

What is less in the public eye, although not for long, is the accelerating successful resistance to wind energy proposals. For wind developers, the same reaction and resistance that occurred in fossil fuel extraction and its transport now block many wind energy projects. Many of the advocates, governmental agencies and developers of wind projects fall into a trap of believing that, because wind is a clean, alternative energy source, it will be welcomed with open arms by everyone, including the local people and their communities. Instead, what people see in the plans is an industrialization of their local area, regardless of whether it affects their own property.

Many rural and local communities by custom have designated certain areas where development of any kind is discouraged, like those sites used primarily for fishing, hunting and family recreation. Or, it might entail a historical site important to local residents or an area that offers an inspiring view corridor.

Our company once encountered some major opposition to a project in the Peters Mountain area of West Virginia. A 765 kV electrical transmission line was designed to cross over the mountain—after it traveled more than 100 miles along the mountainside. Over a seven-year period, roughly 500 local families became actively involved in successfully opposing its construction. To these families, the mountain was practically sacred ground. There were several reasons for this. During the Great Depression, timber had been selectively harvested for construction of new family housing. For generations, funeral ceremonies were conducted at the community cemetery on the mountain top. There was also a tradition of holding Fourth of July picnics on the mountain, and it had provided good, clean water since the late 1700s. Peters Mountain was indeed a sacred place, and the developer was unprepared for this type of roadblock.¹

Even if the energy companies were to take action and win approval in court, the cost associated with delays or the loss of goodwill and subsequent damage to the company’s reputation could be staggering. If more applicants were to take time to learn about local traditions and customs before finalizing their development plans, minimizing costs could be a relatively simple process.

Learning from the Past

What is important for wind energy developers to realize, as well as local, regional and national governments, is that the very elements that spawned the resistance to fossil fuel extraction over the last 40 years not only remain in readiness, but have become institutionalized into the fabric of our society. For wind development to be successful, triggering past reactions must be avoided or prevented.

Yet, the method used to conceive and develop many wind energy proposals is still considered flawed, as decisions on the development schedule and how to proceed locally are often made by executives far away from the field who have limited knowledge of what is important from a local social/cultural standpoint. If these local-site decisions are made without acknowledging the perceived social aspects and community impacts, approval by the local government may be in jeopardy. Looking at it in a different light, these local social and economic issues could even represent opportunities for a project applicant to show how the project’s approval and implementation could help the community address issues that are important to them.

Wind energy companies often spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on wind testing, which includes securing permits and land leases, erecting meteorological towers and incurring agency administrative costs. Few of these companies spend even a fraction of this amount on issues-testing in a community,² even though alleviating those issues can easily propel a project to success. Those companies missed the opportunity to help maintain and enhance a healthy community and have suffered a blow to their reputation, as they are perceived as an intruder rather than a partner.



Peters Mountain in West Virginia was considered a sacred place by the local community.

Failure to address important community issues head-on enables external ideological organizations to enter the community and join (and perhaps lead) local citizens in opposing approval by focusing on these local wedge issues. National organizations can become more successful in halting a project by joining forces with local citizens, as opposed to merely speaking as an outsider in a public meeting about their organization's opposition based on its organization's philosophy or agenda. We see some of the same national groups which opposed fossil fuel developments now becoming involved in the wind energy battles—taking the action away from the local citizens, governments and the development company.

Addressing emerging issues at the local level relies on a bottom-up approach, which is designed to mobilize support through citizen participation and trustworthiness for the project. A decision-making process based on the corporate top-down structure is what typically leads to problems. Recognizing and correcting this is absolutely essential to avoiding conflict.

A Pathway to Success

An emerging new paradigm is characterized by widespread attention to public policy that integrates social-cultural, economic and ecological health considerations into project decisions. From institutions at the global level, to federal and state governments and local ordinances, these considerations are routinely acknowledged to be essential in determining long-term sustainability. Moreover, policies of social responsibility or social license are now routinely front and center within global corporations.³

The reality is that locals are generally inquisitive about a possible wind project when they first hear of it, so it is critical to engage the local community in a participatory process early on. Citizens' first questions are almost always about what benefits they will receive from the project. This is a fair and reasonable question that has often been answered inadequately. Wind companies in the past have been ill-prepared to go much beyond saying that, "It's good for America" or "it will create jobs." Local residents, especially those in Native American Tribes, tend to find this hollow reasoning, given that they do not have an inexpensive direct energy source. If locals are to accept wind turbines on ridge tops where none existed before, then the individual, family and community benefits must be more explicitly recognized and implemented.

A review of past opposition to wind farm projects certainly confirms an inadequate public participation component. Many projects have been delayed, suffered considerable added expense, or were denied altogether due to poorly managed public issues. Local wind developers have consistently given little attention to the public impacts of their projects as part of their initial plan, instead relying on having to sell the project to the public after a controversy has occurred.⁴ At the conflict stage, it is too late to



Informal community-based meetings will uncover potential issues early in the process.

expect citizens to get involved and help the project succeed. By then, advocacy groups have generally taken over, coaching the locals (who may be upset with the project design or its implementation impacts) on how to resist. This neglect of citizen participation at the front end of a project is an Achilles heel of wind energy development.

Our firm, James Kent Associates, has worked successfully with citizens for approval of a new Gas-Insulated Substation and its associated underground transmission line for electrical distribution in the resort village of Snowmass, Colorado, for Holy Cross Energy Company.⁵ Although this was not a wind generation project, we faced highly skeptical citizens and a controversy created by outside vested interests. However, the approval process in this instance was ultimately successful because we used a citizen-designed issue resolution and mitigation process.

Using Strategic Methodology

It only makes good business sense to identify potential issues early, and focus on those that are known for affecting a project's success. Early testing for citizen issues must be undertaken before evaluating potential wind energy sites and transmission line corridors. A project's chance for success is based on engaging in place-based issue prevention and/or resolution so that citizens share and directly benefit from the outcome of development. Wind energy proponents must recognize the need to hire qualified citizen participation specialists to oversee this process openly during the design stage. At this stage, changes and mitigations can take place more easily and costly disruptions can be avoided altogether.

“...triggering past reactions must be avoided or prevented.”

A strategic approach to mitigating community issues has been effectively used in some wind generation locations, such as Sherman County, Oregon where 25% of county revenues are now comprised of wind energy receipts. In addition, wind generation supports economic development programs in an agricultural county, providing needed income diversification for area farmers. In this case, all parties are committed to buying local goods and services when possible. It is a partnership in which the wind company, the county government, the citizens and the communities of Sherman County all benefited from a citizen-based stewardship approach to wind development.⁶

To pave the way for these projects, early application of a few clear strategies can be undertaken. An effective strategic approach would include the following tactics:

1. Introduce the project as one that has community-based stewardship and fosters collaboration in fully addressing the health of the land and the people.
2. Schedule early, direct face-to-face contact with residents of the affected area through informal networks and natural gathering places—not in formal meetings.
3. Become informed about the social and culture characteristics of the project area, and determine whether the project warrants extensive testing among local citizens.
4. Identify and prioritize issues facing local residents. Take proactive steps to prevent a potential ambush by special-interest groups by staying linked to the key issues and the informal networks.
5. Determine which issues can be mitigated or managed by the project. Seek citizen participation and leverage project design improvements that directly optimize the local social, economic and ecological benefits while minimizing negative effects.

Conclusion

In spite of the seemingly chaotic picture that is emerging in wind development, there is at least one trend that seems to hold great promise. People who are affected by proposed wind projects are coming together locally to solve issues of common concern. It's a trend that has been gradually developing for more than a decade.

They are coming together not only to solve issues, but also to formulate plans and pursue common visions.

A commitment must be made to manage the long-term impacts, deal with local social and economic effects, and create strategies that allow communities to participate in absorbing the impacts of wind energy development. Without that commitment, resistance will continue and projects will become unreasonably costly or fail altogether. If long term conflict on this issue becomes embedded in the approval and permitting process, as it did with fossil fuels, developing wind energy will needlessly become more difficult, more expensive or even prohibited. It does not have to be this way.

For the most part, people are concerned about their own back yards—the public and private lands surrounding their communities. These are the same lands they depend on for their livelihoods, recreation and quality of life. It is critical that wind developers understand the issues already present in these areas where wind machines and transmission corridors are planned if they are to succeed in making wind energy available on a large scale. Contributing to the ecological stewardship of the land and partnering with local communities are essential components to harmonious wind development projects. ✪

References

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