

# Prevailing Against Anti-Wind Sentiment

*Turning anti-wind sentiment into permits requires organization, strategy and plain ol' grassroots politics.*

BY BEN KELAHER

Community relations may be the road to reputation, but understanding practical local politics paves the way to permits. Opposition groups are sophisticated, organized and well funded. They have borrowed the highest-priced tactics from corporate public relations and masterfully use the Web to circulate misinformation about the impacts of wind farms.

Understanding how the opposition plans to stop your wind farm may be the first step toward planning for its approval. The truth is that planned wind developments run into local trouble every day. Let's begin by examining some customary tactics used by the opposition.

## **Opportunistic opposition**

Energy developers, particularly wind developers, expect to face opposition from individual landowners and other residents based on the typical siting concerns, such as shadow flicker, noise impacts and property value arguments, that pop up across the country. However, in some cases, the opposition takes on some special interest from known characters. Thus, it also takes special care in managing their impact.

Local politicians are accustomed to the usual suspects showing up at public hearings and in letters to the editor of weekly papers on controversial development projects.

Now, wind companies are beginning to notice a pattern to the cast of opponents appearing before zoning hearing boards, road commissioners and alderman, who oppose wind farms using the locality's zoning codes and planning restrictions as tools to defeat developments town to town.

In Illinois alone, developers such as Horizon Wind Energy, NextEra Energy Resources and Iberdrola Renewables have been the targets of vociferous anti-wind sentiment.

## **Turning to the Web**

Need talking points for the public hearing tonight? Look no further than the growing number of Web sites that circulate their own "myth versus fact" sheets about wind farms and their impact on local communities. Many of these sites have organized talking points by issue, including public safety concerns, such as wind turbine syndrome, or counterarguments to wind energy's effectiveness, such as like intermittency.

There are plenty of anti-wind Web sites online. These sites provide a quick primer should you be motivated to oppose the local wind farm proposed down the road. Further, they provide best practices borrowed from wind energy site fights from around the globe, complete with personal testimonials of those that have opposed wind turbines and won.

The effectiveness of these online anti-wind sites is not necessarily their basis, because impactful opposition doesn't necessarily need sound science or experience to be effective with local politicians. All it takes is an emotional trigger on a critical local issue to start the flames of opposition to motivate a vocal minority.

If the anti-wind sentiment goes unchecked by a majority of people in the project area who make known their support based on equally passionate arguments that activate locals to take political action on your behalf, you could be in trouble come the day of the permit vote.

## **Democracy in action**

Wind developers are keen on establishing strong relationships within their communities. Community meetings are a popular method for introducing your project to the most people at one time.

An efficient and productive use of time and resources, community meetings provide an educational, one-stop shop for answering questions and informing the public about your plans. Although these meetings can allay the concerns of locals, perceptions can change if you let the opposition speak at the gatherings.

So, that raises the question: Why have these meetings if they are not required? Some developers, mindful

of being new to the community, do so as a courtesy. But is it helpful?

"It's one thing if an agency requires a public session – you have to do those," says Robert Kahn, a 25-year veteran public relations consultant working in wind power, "But it's rarely a good idea to volunteer to host your own," he says. "Too often, a public meeting simply provides opponents a chance to identify one another and get better organized. There are much better ways to get the word out."

When the format for a community forum plays to the positions of opponents, beware.

Here's how it typically occurs: In an effort to demonstrate transparency and a willingness to consider resident concerns about a wind development plan, the developer begins with a 10-minute presentation of the proposed plan, with specific sound bites reviewing the merits of constructing the wind farm in town. Some of the positives include green jobs, tax revenue, road improvements and donations to local schools. All of those benefits accruing to the community sound wonderful.

After your presentation, undecided residents are satisfied, even though they know it's in your financial best interest to say so. So even after hearing the pitch, they may not trust you. Then, the outspoken opposition speaks about public safety and health issues. For those attending the hearing, it is a question of taking sides.

If you are fortunate, the undecided members will leave undecided. However, those who have decided may be recruited to speak against you at the next hearing on your special-use permit.

At some point in the approval process, holding an open house allows local residents to see visual simulations, maps and descriptions

of construction plans and schedules, along with displays of planned environmental mitigations. An open house is far more relaxed than a community meeting.

Thinking like your opponents may mean acting like them. Several wind power developers have encouraged local citizens to organize support groups around which to rally environmental and property rights activists, business interests and other pro-wind constituencies. Think of these groups as an anti-not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) antidote.

"There's no substitute for supporters standing up and speaking out on behalf of proposed projects," Kahn says. "They can say things which a developer, who has one hand tied behind his back, can't."

#### **What you can do**

However, until such counter-NIMBY organizations expand, developers must make a concerted effort to outnumber the vocal minority and special interest groups that desire a political victory for their own constituencies and members. It can be done, starting with the following basic steps:

**Research.** Understand the political climate surrounding your project before you go public with your proposal. First, make a list of likely supporters and opponents. Then, do some research. Has this site been the subject of previous controversies? Some sites are considered too troublesome and will never succeed in obtaining change-of-use permits. Knowing the history of the site could impact your decision making.

**Time and target your outreach.** Never let the news media be the first to describe the impact of your wind project nor be considered the best source of facts about your plans for the site. Inform the politicians and neighbors before they read it in the press.

**Persuade.** Go door to door informing landowners and residents. Explain the proposal, and attempt to determine who will support it, who will stay neutral and who will oppose. Shortcuts, such as hosting public meetings, will not do the trick in inculcating public opinion over a wind power project.

Get started by scheduling small meetings with key constituencies and community leaders. "These are the people who shape local opinion," says Kahn. "Their support will be indispensable in countering the opposition."

**Political process.** You need to attack this as if you were a local politician running for office, which means identifying, recruiting and organizing. Organize supporters, and then get them to attend meetings, sign petitions and write letters to the editor. Above all, you need to demonstrate public support equal to or greater than that of your opponents.

**Negotiate when possible.** In some cases, you can offer mitigation, or negotiate in some other way to get opponents to drop their positions. In other cases, the opponents or their backers have an economic interest in defeating your project that will never be overcome by an attempt at compromise.

In those cases, you must marshal sufficient political support to overcome the opposition and be prepared to educate your supporters in the community about what you know about your opposition – where they come from and why you feel they're involved. Let them be the judge. **SYN**

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*Ben Kelahan is senior vice president, energy, at Vienna, Va.-based Saint Consulting Group, a community outreach consultancy. He can be reached at (703) 531-8274 or kelahan@tscg.biz.*