Community Engagement and Wind Energy

Above Photo: Fairmont, Nova Scotia
SOURCE: RILEY SMITH

What are the benefits of early and open community involvement?

When a community is well informed about wind energy and trusts its local planning process, there is usually less opposition to a proposed wind energy project. Early and open community involvement encourages logical dialogue based on mutual respect.

It begins with education. Education about wind energy must be factual and presented from different perspectives. Wind energy projects can have both positive and negative impacts. Myths about wind energy can lead to fear; balanced information and consistent communication can dispel them.

Nova Scotia municipalities have discussed sustainability and climate change in developing their Integrated Community Sustainability Plans (ICSPs) and Municipal Climate Change Action Plans (MCCAPs). These often included dialogue on energy generation, distribution and use, typically focusing on renewable energy sources like wind.

These discussions set the stage for later engagement on specific wind energy proposals and proposed projects based on education. Ideally, dialogue on wind energy development doesn't start with a proposal to install wind turbines but is rooted in broader discussion of electricity needs and sources.

Early and open community involvement increases the likelihood that a proposed project will meet the values and expectations of the community. Engagement is a two-way street; it ensures that the community is well informed and that municipal leaders and project developers understand its needs.

SOURCE: COMMUNICATIONS NS

Higgins Mountain, Nova Scotia

How can communities be better engaged?

Community discussions on sources of electricity, its distribution and its use introduced as part of local planning initiatives like ICSPs and MCCAP should continue. The broader goals created in these plans form a solid foundation for wind energy projects; additional citizen involvement will lead to appropriate wind energy projects being developed in communities.

Municipal planning tools, like land use by-laws, can promote early community engagement in specific wind energy projects. For example, Halifax Regional Municipality requires that wind energy developers notify nearby residents before installing a meteorological tower. This ensures that residents are aware of a proposed project early on, and often motivates developers to engage earlier as a result. Informally, municipal leaders can advise project developers, private companies or municipal public works staff on appropriate ways to engage the community.

There is no one "right" way to engage a community; the approach will be as individual as the municipality. Elected officials and municipal staff are the experts on the dynamics of their community; however, there are best practices for community engagement specific to wind energy development described later in this Fact Sheet.

Who should be consulted in planning a wind energy project?

The community comprises residents and their leaders, businesses, institutions and community groups, with a range of demographics and opinion. Consultation should be designed to reach different ages and education levels, as well as different points of view. All members of the community are stakeholders in the proposed wind energy project; the plan for engagement needs to consider their unique concerns.

As rights holders, the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia should be consulted early and in a meaningful way on proposed wind energy projects. The nearest Mi'kmaq Band Council should be contacted, as well as the Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn, also known as Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative. The Mi'kmaq claim title and right to hunt, fish and harvest in all traditional uses of land in Nova Scotia. These claims are subject to ongoing negotiations between the Mi'kmaq and the Nova Scotian and Canadian governments.

SOURCE: ALAN WHITE

Amherst, Nova Scotia

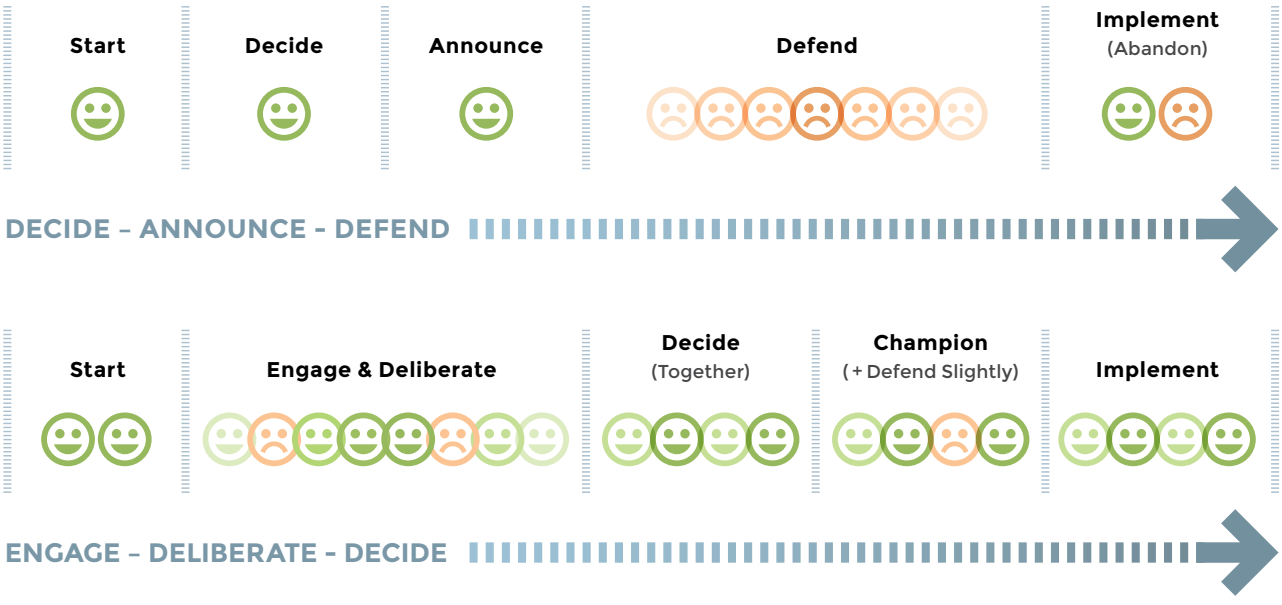
SOURCE: JANIS ROD

Digby, Nova Scotia

Which approach would you choose in planning your wind energy project?

Consider a single large turbine proposed in two different Nova Scotia communities with similar characteristics. In one scenario, the community is made aware of the proposed turbine only after the plan has been well developed. This is the Decide – Announce – Defend model: it is more likely to elicit opposition, which may put the proposal at risk. The other scenario begins community engagement in the early stages of project planning. Community members are part of the discussion and decision making. This is the Engage – Deliberate – Decide model: it is more likely to result in a proposal that is acceptable to the community.

Figure 9A: Community Engagement Models



SOURCE: JANIS ROD

Higgins, Nova Scotia

SOURCE: JANIS ROD

Digby, Nova Scotia

What are some best practices for community engagement?

Community engagement plans should reflect the proposed project's scale and scope and the stakeholders' expected level of interest. The spectrum of engagement may range from informing and consulting the community to programs that actively involve the community. Communities can become true partners in a project where they actively collaborate or empower decision making.

Table 9A: Spectrum of Engagement (International Association for Public Participation)

Level of Public Impact	Example Techniques
Inform	Fact Sheets; Websites; Open Houses.
Consult	Public Comment; Focus Groups; Surveys; Public Meetings.
Involve	Workshops; Deliberative Polling.
Collaborate	Citizen Advisory Committees; Consensus Building; Participatory Decision-Making.
Empower	Citizen Juries; Ballots; Delegated Decision.

The Canadian Wind Energy Association has developed a best practice guide for community engagement and public consultation. It suggests the most common tools for involving the community, like open houses, formal presentations, workshops, community advisory committees, toll-free telephone line, one-on-one briefings, site visits, informal communication and project website.[1]

[1] *http://canwea.ca/pdf/canwea-communityengagement-report-e-final-web.pdf*

If there is negativity and opposition, how should it be addressed?

Any proposed change in a community can result in opposition; no diverse community will see issues from a single perspective. While there are now many wind turbines in Nova Scotia, their development has been relatively recent; there are bound to be different points of view on wind energy.

Questions should be expected and encouraged in any community engagement process. If questions are not met with direct and timely responses, the initial interest may turn to negativity and opposition.

Negativity and opposition should be handled respectfully. It is important that the perspectives of those expressing concerns be understood; at that point, the facts can be clarified and presented so that options can be examined. It is essential to show respect at all times, share information in a balanced manner, and demonstrate empathy for the reasons underlying citizens' concerns.

What are the regulatory requirements for public and Mi'kmaq consultation?

For some wind energy projects, there are provincial regulatory requirements for consultation. For a wind energy project 2 MW or more in name plate capacity, an environmental assessment (EA) is required. Under the Environmental Assessment Regulations, the Minister of the Environment must consider the consultation activities undertaken, the concerns expressed by the public and the Mi'kmaq, and the steps taken to address concerns.

The provincial government is committed to a coordinated, meaningful consultation process with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia. The Province has a duty to consult with the Mi'kmaq when proposed activities have the potential to impact traditional rights, including title and treaty rights like hunting, fishing and harvesting. Wind energy project developers have an important role in this consultation process.[2]

Several municipalities in Nova Scotia include specific consultation requirements for wind energy projects in their planning documents. These vary across the Province.

My Ideas and Notes

2 *www.novascotia.ca/nse/ea/docs/ea-proponents-guide-to-mikmaq-consultation.pdf*

SOURCE: NATURAL FORCES

Fairmont, Nova Scotia

SOURCE: NATURAL FORCES

Fairmont, Nova Scotia

Case Study Basic Stats

Location:

Municipality of the County of Antigonish

Output:

4.6 MW

No. of Turbines:

2

Case Study: FAIRMONT WIND FARM

A 4.6 MW wind energy project in the Municipality of the County of Antigonish, the Fairmont Wind Farm began producing electricity in November, 2012. One-on-one discussions with land owners and municipal staff began in July 2009 and public consultation began in February 2010. Consultation tools included a website, private meetings, mail-outs, public meetings, media reports, and direct engagement with the Mi'kmaq, as well as meetings with municipal staff, elected officials and provincial government staff. During the public comment period of the EA, no negative comments were received on the proposed large wind energy project.