

*Perceptions of Wind and Grid in Rural
Communities: Opportunity or Burden?*

Galway Wind Acceptance Workshop
September 2010

This presentation

- A view from a rural perspective
- Not based on detailed research in this field though I have looked at the research
- Based on experience of planning on both sides of the fence
- Also using general ideas regarding community consultation and communication

Elements

- This issue can be considered at three levels at least –
 - The macro societal policy level
 - The regional/local plan level
 - The micro project level
- Each level needs to be addressed
- I am primarily going to consider the matter at the micro level

Let me start with some propositions

- There is no such thing as the rural community
- There is a fundamental distrust of those seen to be imposing themselves on the population of an area
- Societal benefit is poor compensation for perceived personal loss
- Vacuums are instantly filled with rumour and worst-case information
- The Irish planning system has particular characteristics that impact on this whole issue
- A determined though small group can generate perceived levels of opposition beyond their size
- Winning can become the issue so that rational argument is of little use

Rural Community(ies)

- What is meant when we use the term ‘rural community’?
 - Vague idea of a coherent entity with a singular view
 - May be true in some isolated areas that have not seen change
 - In most cases have to speak of rural communities
 - Landowners involved in project
 - Landowners not involved in project
 - Those nearby
 - Those not nearby
 - Indigenous non land-owning residents
 - The ‘new’ ruralites
 - Driven to rural areas by urban costs
 - Moved to rural areas for rural idyll
 - The communalites and engaged
 - The isolates and excluded
- Each group is likely to have a somewhat different perspective on intrusive developments
- Any individual will be a member of more than one category

Distrust

- We live in an age of distrust
- Leaders of all types are seen to have misled us in a variety of ways
- Where an unwelcome development is proposed the perspective may well be that whatever is said about it has elements of untruth within it
- Opponents can seize on this distrust and feed it
- The more 'external' a proposer is the more likely is it that this distrust will arise
- Distrust can be seized on and exploited
- Incomplete communication and late or grudging proposal changes and offers feed the distrust or at least give grounds to feed it

The Irish Planning System

- Some particular characteristics
 - National guidelines
 - Policy and licence
 - Executive decision-making
 - Third-party appeals
- UK perspective

But it's clean and green.....

- Proposers of anything tend to focus on the positive aspects
- This is natural. But.....
- Proposers can get to the point of not acknowledging or not accepting
 - The negative elements of a proposal
 - The validity of other viewpoints regarding the proposal
 - The integrity of opponents of the proposal
- This is foolish
- Because something has positive elements does not mean that it doesn't have negative ones as well
- The designer should always walk in the other person's shoes
 - If *I* was living here.....
 - And try to respond – early, positively and demonstrably

Societal good and personal pain

- The general benefit of rural wind developments accrue to a society as a whole
- In the rural area involved there will be clear winners and perceived losers
 - Landowners who are involved and to rural dwellers who are able to invest
 - Nearby property owners who are not able to participate may well feel they are suffering the loss
- There is little benefit to others in the locality
 - Jobs are few and probably located elsewhere
 - Downstream economic benefits are few
- If there is perceived personal pain the pain needs to be acknowledged and addressed in some way
 - Feeling respected is often a real issue
- If wind developments are to be seen as generally beneficial shared benefit is an issue that needs to be addressed early and as part of the development process

A small band.....

- SEAI survey suggested positive attitudes towards wind-farms
 - Survey does not indicate the proximity of respondents to windfarms and whether that had an effect on responses
 - Also not clear as to the breakdown between landowners and non landowners
- There is evidence from other types of study that general positive attitudes are not always matched by positive responses in practice
- Survey also suggests that there is a significant level of opposition
- Some opposition will probably never be addressed
- However, social acceptability is about group rather than individual responses
- *Key objective has to be that of ensuring that an individual negative response does not come to drive a negative communal response*

A small *but determined* band

- The Irish planning system offers encouragement to objectors to developments
- Engagement in the process is relatively easy and relatively cheap – and can have significant impacts on milestones and time horizons
- Participation in the process also provides opportunities for
 - Political lobbying
 - Community activation
 - Media exposure
 - Personal status enhancement
- The more lack of honesty, lack of engagement and lack of information there is in the proposal the more there is opportunity for exploitation in a negative campaign

So...

- For rural dwellers how can the benefits of proposals be maximised and the perception of burdens minimised?
 - The good news is that you are operating in a generally positive environment
 - The trick is to maintain that generally positive environment
 - Communicate early and honestly
 - Admit impacts
 - If a proposal will not be changed don't imply that it might be – but start the discussions when the possibility is still open
 - Trying to avoid a fixed 'winner-takes-all' situation is really important
 - Identify and interact with community leaders
 - Interact also with affected individuals – especially those most affected
 - Consider the needs of *all dwellers* in the rural area
 - Consider the individual impacts as well the technical optimum from a design perspective
 - Mitigate where possible
 - Establish a system of community gain and offer it early

And even then....

- The best that can be hoped for is minimum opposition
 - Some are going to object in principle no matter what
 - Avoiding wide-spread opposition is a good objective
 - And, of course, it might be even better....!!
- It is likely that nobody will be completely happy
 - The job is to keep everybody equally unhappy!!