



New England Visions 2030 Institute

Catalyst for Change

Forum - The Changing Face of New England No. 1

The cumulative social impact of the New England REZ on our communities

Wednesday 6th September Armidale Bowling Club

Summary of Proceedings by Team member Peter Sniekers

Mayors' presentations:

Mayor Sam Coupland (Armidale Regional Council):

- The introduction of the New England renewable Energy Zone (NEREZ) will be the biggest change to the region since European settlement.
- We cannot stop it from coming because it and all the Renewable Energy (RE) projects involved (including grid projects) are State significant developments. The State Government is the consent authority. However maybe we can “shape” it.
 - It's like a freight train thundering into our communities being controlled by higher authorities, which local Councils however will need to navigate.
- Councils were not consulted before planning started and to create a united voice, REZ regional mayors have now formed their own coalition with mayors from New England (Armidale, Uralla, Walcha, Glen Innes), the Hunter and Central West (called Coalition of Renewable Energy Mayors – COREM).
- There is real polarisation and a wide range of attitudes in this room and in the community on the NEREZ. Let's use today to explore possibilities. We all have to live here.

Mayor Robert Bell (Uralla Shire Council)

- Home to the New England Solar Farm – stage 1 complete (300MW). Stage 2 under construction. Stage 3 dropped for now.
 - Some landowners saw the solar farms as a way of drought proofing their properties and had linked up to create very large projects like the New England Solar Farm.
 - The companies have been making private agreements with these landowners.
- There are four major developments planned for Uralla LGA with other large projects around Kentucky and Kyabra in the pipeline.
- Developers need EnergyCo (Energy Corporation of NSW) approval.
- However transmission lines approval is a different process.
- Council receives community development funds from RE developers. Uralla Council has developed a Grants Committee to ensure the money coming to the LGA will be equitably distributed. Council wants to see more imaginative projects delivered

- with these funds other than only straight community development, and wants to look at other sources of funding to deliver ongoing benefits. These other sources include:
 - o 1.5% of RE project capital costs (currently being negotiated)
 - o A share of the EnergyCo connection fee paid by developers.
 - o A share of new transmission line costs.
- Major concerns of large RE projects include:
 - o To ensure these large RE projects do not start construction concurrently (to minimise impacts on local infrastructure / housing / services / accommodation etc).
 - o Handling waste.
 - o Decommissioning at end of project life.
- What will happen will challenge all of us. Collaboration is essential. Need better communication so we are on the front foot rather than playing catch-up.

Mayor Eric Noakes (Walcha Council)

- Councils are struggling with the high amount of community anxiety resulting from the way the NEREZ is being introduced into Walcha LGA.
 - o People see their community as being under siege.
 - o There has been an information void.
 - o He asked people to not lash out at council / developers / neighbours, but direct their frustrations at the State Government and EnergyCo.
- Winterbourne Wind Farm was 12 years in planning yet hardly anyone knew about it. That lack of transparency and proper consultation has led to much anger in the community.
- Decommissioning is a real issue and one problem is accountability when projects are on-sold.
- There will be enormous pressure on their limited services, on roads, housing, etc. during the construction phase.
- Needs to be greater transparency and less “confidentiality agreements”.
- Other issues raised:
 - o Benefits will include employment, share of community funds delivering community benefits. However,
 - o Walcha cannot fit the estimated number of construction workers expected
 - o Could destroy tourism in the region
 - o Will put pressure on water / waste services and resources.
 - o Could disrupt use of Oxley Highway.
- We are too far down the road to turn projects away.
- Many people from outside are involved: EnergyCo, DPIE, TfNSW (Transport for NSW), project developers.
- Lack of collaboration between State and Federal governments.
- Any biodiversity offset funds from projects should be spent within the community where the project is located.
- Local Government should be closest to the community; however in the NEREZ process Local Government has been disenfranchised.
 - o At the same time Council is resource challenged .
 - o “Consultation / Engagement” is more than just providing information. It is real discussion and collaboration.

Question / Answer session:

Q: How much of the regional tip has been filled with broken solar panels?

A: Sam Coupland: Unsure / will take on notice. Councils do not have to take the waste. There are companies that now recycle the components of old or damaged panels and council could just set up a collection point. Robert Bell: There is an opportunity for us to have our own recycling facility.

UNSW is undertaking research into recycling solar panels.

Q: Have Councils in the NEREZ agreed to the number of turbines, the number of GW of RE power? Who will be funding extra maintenance on roads (damaged during construction)? What about impact on access to health / hospitals and emergency services due to projects' road use?

A: Eric Noakes: A limit of turbine numbers has not been discussed. Planning has not yet been completed. Projects will pay for road maintenance but we don't know which routes projects will use to bring in material.

Q: Oxley Highway needs a lot of work. Is there a timeframe and cost? Who is going to pay.

A: Eric Noakes: No answer on timeframe. A report is being prepared by GHD. Companies using the road will pay

Q: Large projects will have social impacts: Large numbers of employees coming will impact rental availability and will increase rents. Local renters will leave town. How can Councils prevent population loss?

A: Sam Coupland: We know it is coming. Armidale will likely be the "dormitory" for the NEREZ workers due to its size. Sees Armidale setting up a 'village' for the FIFO workers so that they don't put pressure on the rental market. The 'village' could then become a resource afterwards for crisis accommodation or other after construction. Councils need to work with developers, Planning, EnergyCo to ensure community does not miss out.

Q: Minutes of last COREM meeting were requested but not provided to a local group, and suspect nothing has been done. What have you been doing?

A: Sam Coupland: The group has been working hard behind the scenes and are proud of progress. Details are confidential but will be reflected in the revised Wind Energy Guidelines being developed, and the positives in those guidelines are directly as a result of COREM activity. There is nothing sinister here – don't appreciate the accusation from the floor. Eric Noakes: again – anger is misdirected: direct it at the right people. This is a slow process.

Q: Did Councils put in objections to the Winterbourne project in the NEREZ? Don't think there is majority support for the project.

A: Eric Noakes: That project predates the NEREZ and is not part of the NEREZ (although will be within the boundaries of the NEREZ). Robert Bell: recalls at the time of initial project discussion there was almost universal support / appreciation for the project due to the decline of the local timber industry. But now there are issues of cumulative impact, access to water / gravel, impact on roads etc to consider as a result of multiple projects.

Statement: Maria Hitchcock: NEV2030 has been advocating to the government for training opportunities in the NEREZ rather than relying on FIFO employees.

Q: Yarrowyck area: an area of high biodiversity, but is in planning area for a windfarm. Biodiversity maps are 6-7 years out of date. What is being done?

A: Robert Bell: Yes agree – Uralla Shire Council is advocating for biodiversity mapping updates and for biodiversity offsets to be spent locally. However until the Yarrowyck project lodges planning documents, Councils have nothing to respond to regarding biodiversity concerns.

Q: There has been an information void from State member and Council. I will be looking at 1.6 million solar panels and want screening vegetation. I am also concerned about erosion and flooding from the increased runoff from solar panels.

A: Robert Bell: Any questions / concerns and requests like these for the New England Solar Farm can be forwarded to Council who can send to developers for comment and response. Runoff management forms part of the EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) for the project.

Q: Why can't turbine blades / wind farm materials be transported by train?

A: Robert Bell: Was looked at but uneconomic and not feasible physically. Every tunnel / bridge is inaccessible – the components are just too large (65-80m in length).

Q: Why did Uralla object to the Winterbourne Wind Farm?

A: Robert Bell: At the time 2-3 turbines were in the Uralla Shire Council footprint, and most of the gravel required would have come from Uralla, and there had been no consultation.

Q: When the NEREZ was announced were the Mayors and community consulted?

A: Robert Bell: Announcement was made in November 2021 with little consultation and we are playing catch up. Eric Noakes: There was no pre-consultation before concept launch.

Q: From wildlife group: Advocating for cancelling all RE projects and all region go to 100% rooftop solar instead. Can Councils negotiate to put all solar panels on rooftops in the region?

A: Sam Coupland; Yes can make that suggestion to EnergyCo.

Q: Would it be useful to urge State Government to be more transparent and actually “plan”? ie. Have better planning processes?

A: Sam Coupland: Recommend send email to your Council Mayor with those recommendations and we can pass on.

Q: Is there going to be a cumulative impact study done on RE projects in the NEREZ?

A: Sam Coupland: Understand one has not yet been done, but EnergyCo is funding such a study and is developing Terms of Reference currently. Robert Bell: DPIE is now also asking for that in their planning processes, especially on roads / amenity / land use etc.

Next forum : Changing Face of New England series: Wind Farms