

5 Innovative ways to assure wind farm projects gain approval

Words: Al Maiorino



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Even with the many environmental benefits of wind farms over traditional sources, wind still faces opposition across the U.S., especially in rural areas. South Dakota has been expecting dramatic growth in wind energy production for some time now, but the contentious debates surrounding the approval of new wind farms has created a drift between residents and caused the state to lag.

Although in most cases wind turbines will create a minimal impact on the landscape, some residents feel the turbines are too unsightly, loud, and disruptive to wildlife, ignoring the many benefits, such as tax revenue, the project will bring to the state and local communities.

Despite the local opposition, there has

Global wind capacity is set to double by 2027, and the United States is in the midst of the most lucrative time to increase production of wind energy. Renewable companies are fueled by an urgency to capture tax subsidies and currently in many parts of the country; wind is the cheapest source of new electric generating capacity.

been recent good news from the federal government for offshore wind projects, as the Trump administration announced it is pushing ahead with building wind turbines off the Atlantic coastline. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management has already requested input on which parts of the U.S. Atlantic present the greatest chance for leasing by offshore developers. Still, it has not always been smooth sailing for offshore projects which have faced many problems in the past competing with their onshore counterparts.

Opponents often resist offshore wind farms because they will spoil views of the ocean, endanger wildlife, and harm fishing and tourism. However, some view offshore projects as a trade-off of sorts if able to build wind farms farther offshore, lessening the public's concern about seeing turbines close to the coast.

Companies seeking to bring new on-shore and offshore wind projects to function in the US will need to develop a targeted communications campaign to promote the projects, build public support and avoid further delays that waste time and money. Here are some tactics to consider in an integrated communications plan to build public support and educate residents on any wind project:

Educate your stakeholders

Including local and regional stakeholder groups in your project discussion is critical. Stakeholders go beyond landowners, though their support is also essential. Stakeholders can include a variety of people and groups, such as former elected officials, chambers of commerce, downtown business groups, neighborhood groups, civic and nonprofit groups, and even education committee organizations. Start by reaching out to these groups to set up presentations to members or meetings with leadership.

There are many ways stakeholders can help amplify messaging through newsletters, email blasts, social media engagement, events and more. Local elected officials like to see community outreach. It is important to engage stakeholders to activate their contacts as part of the grassroots efforts as these groups can amplify messaging and enhance support in a meaningful way through coordinated calls to action.

Social Media Campaign

Launching social media pages dedicated to the project as soon as it is announced may not be every wind company's first inclination, but it creates a defined target audience to reach with regular posts, and

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is highly recommended from the start. An effective target audience composed of local community members can be built quickly through earned media and bolstered by paid advertising, which is very cost effective.

The ads can help boost content or promote your page among any number of demographics, and importantly, geographic locations to reach those who matter most – constituents of officials who will vote on the project. Regular posts that include informative graphics, project updates and background research will then help to educate the local community and reach new potential advocates as they are shared throughout each social network.

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Video and Aerial Drone Footage

Video calls to action are a great way for your audience to obtain key ideas about your project or ways to get involved as it is incredibly versatile. For example, educational videos can help outline the benefits of wind power to help shift public perception.

In recent years aerial drone footage of

development projects has increased rapidly and is less expensive than other forms of aerial photography. Aerial drone footage of the site or an existing wind farm will allow the public to visualize the project in a unique way. Many objections to wind turbines are because they’re too noisy, intrusive and a danger to wildlife.

However, aerial drone footage could help dispel myths and show residents those nuisances are minimal. For example, the drone could demonstrate that at a particular distance comparable to various setbacks, wind turbines are only about as noisy as a refrigerator—a fact many may not know.

Aerial photography obtained from site footage can be used in marketing brochures, social media accounts and websites. Following approval, footage can show the construction process through a video or GIF, or even use still images.

Host an open house

Hosting a community open house once a project is announced allows residents to have one-on-one conversations with the project team. Residents can voice their concerns or ask questions individually to ensure their voices are heard, and the company can tweak plans based on the public’s feedback. The open house should

have four or five stations with experts on various topics. Each table should have drawings, handouts and any other relevant materials to the project.

Political style campaigning

Plan a state house day summit (and/or town hall summit if only local approvals are required) to bring supporters and educational materials to elected officials early. Busy staffers and officials appreciate information being brought to them. Having conversations with state, county and local elected officials about a wind company’s interest in their community can make the difference down the road. Getting the attention of these busy officials requires mobilizing their constituents in an informed, coordinated manner.

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Al Maiorino started Public Strategy Group, Inc. in 1995. His firm has developed and managed multiple corporate public affairs campaigns in a variety of industries such as gaming, cable television, retail development, auto racing, energy and residential projects. Additionally, his firm has worked on projects in twenty states and three countries.