Putting Community Input First – Planning for Renewable Energy Development

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Renewables and the Second Law of Thermodynamics

- It's easy to forget that we're turning sunlight – either as photons or wind – into electricity.
- Converting a dispersed resource into electricity takes a lot of space, measured in square feet or acres.
- From utility-scale projects to rooftop solar, renewables projects create a range of impacts that affect their neighbors.

Putting the Community First

- Traditional project development triggers the permitting process after a range of siting decisions are made in private by the developer.

- A project environmental impact statement reflects this sequence of events, putting community input after initial siting decisions .

- Local planning processes, especially when mobilized in advance of development, can allow for community involvement in the development process.

Examples of Putting the Community First: Residential

- Comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance language can provide for residential solar and small wind – decades of examples.
- City or county-level government initiates a planning process, public hearings inform the decision, proposed language developed, final rules promulgated, final public comment period.
- Developer or homeowner knows the rules, neighbors have an appeal process for violations.

Examples of Putting the Community First: Large-Scale

- Areas that anticipate large-scale projects can create a comparable process, usually called an overlay zone, and should consider performing environmental studies in advance.

- NEPA and most states provide for programmatic environmental impact statements designed to inform decision makers before a project is proposed.

- Community input can then precede siting decisions, through the programmatic EIS process, and be in response to publicly funded environmental studies.

Why Pre-Plan Large Projects?

- The main flaws of traditional permitting:

  Developers make initial siting decisions without public input.

  Project EIS documents are always seen as suspect because the developer pays for them.

  Project EIS scoping comes after siting decisions have been made and money has been spent on the selected site.

  The "comprehensive" impacts analysis of a project EIS is limited to the project site and immediate surroundings.

- Pre-planning and the programmatic EIS resolve these issues.

Energy Overlay Zones

- On completion of the programmatic EIS, comprehensive plan and zoning hearings allow for additional public input.
- An overlay zone, allowing for renewable project development according to certain rules, is then implemented.
- Developers following those rules get expedited permits.

Specific Example

- Two hours east of Portland(ia), Klickitat County Washington has 19,000 people, 1,800 square miles, and 1200 MW of wind projects worth approximately $1.5 billion.
- The energy overlay zone process cost approximately $500k and was paid for by the first wind project's taxes.
- 1/3 of the county was excluded from development based on programmatic EIS results.
- An additional 50 square miles was excluded from the energy overlay process at the request of local residents.