

‘With us, not to us’;

The Need for Proper Community Consultation in the Development of Renewable Energy Infrastructure in Regional Australia

Policy Paper

Regional Capitals Australia

Regional Capitals Australia (RCA) was formed in 2012 to represent the interests of Australia’s regional capital cities. Our objective is to ensure these needs are reflected in national policy and funding priorities. Regional capital cities perform a ‘capital city’ role within their regions, providing a central point of access to essential services, commerce, employment and education. These services are accessed by local residents as well as those in surrounding towns and rural areas.

Regional capital cities also provide a liveable alternative for people and businesses wishing to escape Australia’s congested metropolitan cities. Every year regional capital cities generate \$225 billion, or more than 16 per cent of national economic activity. All RCA members have a growth agenda and stand ready to ensure a growing Australia means a stronger and more equitable regional Australia.

Policy Platform

The following outlines Regional Capitals Australia’s framework to grow regional capital cities that are:

- 1. Strong service centres:** that continue to be a central point to access essential infrastructure, services, business, employment and education;
- 2. Easing the metropolitan congestion:** encouraging regional migration and decentralisation options for new and existing residents and businesses can take the pressure of major metropolitan capitals; and
- 3. An affordable alternative:** providing affordable housing and industry industrial land options for families and business seeking to avoid the inflated housing markets of the major metropolitan capitals.

To achieve this vision, we must continue to build regional capital cities that are:

- 1. Connected:** with roads, rail, airports (and services), broadband and mobile telecommunications;
- 2. Productive:** with diverse economies that can be built with government and private sector decentralisation and skilled labour shaped through strong tertiary and continuing education opportunities; and
- 3. Liveable:** with high levels of essential services, social amenities and a continued supply of affordable housing options.

Renewable Energy, Consultation and Regional Australia

Regional Capitals Australia is seeking to ensure that genuine community consultation is a process that is embedded within all regional renewable energy projects.

Renewable energy (wind and solar) and other energy infrastructure (transmission towers) is being planned and constructed across Australia to meet the increased targets set by the Australian and State Governments.

RCA recognises that Australia has committed to make a transition to renewable energy to reduce our carbon emissions in line with the Paris Agreement. The impacts of delivering a rapid renewable energy transition needs to be considered, particularly on the communities on the front line of this transition – regional communities.

In the minds of landowners and communities, these front line impacts can include:

- Loss of trees and plant life;
- Impact on wildlife;
- Acquisition of private and public land;
- Visual impact of construction hubs and infrastructure to scenic and local vistas;
- Damage and congestion from large machinery using local roads;
- Construction noise and air and ground pollution;
- Long construction phases;
- Increases in worker numbers to rural areas; and
- Demand for limited local housing.

To effectively address these impacts, companies and government involved in delivering the infrastructure needed to transition to renewable energy need to “obtain legitimacy, credibility and trust

before embarking on a project that will impact the lives of many people.”¹ This ‘social license to operate’ is built through sustained and in-depth community consultation, which can be achieved through a range of methods.

These include community reference groups, public forums, and open review processes for key planning documents. There is also a need for consistency in the way consultation is implemented in the planning and implementation of all big build projects.

For these reasons, we recommend that robust community consultation and best practice engagement is established as a minimum standard for all renewable energy projects.

The Need

Along with meeting established development processes through Environmental Effects Statements, Federal and State Governments must acknowledge the need for, and require, all renewable energy projects to have a best-practice stakeholder engagement strategy and plan.

Government planning processes and those of companies directly involved in the planning and roll-out of renewable energy infrastructure need to be genuinely committed to community consultation at all important phases of the process.

The value of good process will see impacted individuals, businesses and communities having a genuine opportunity to raise and discuss concerns about a project and feel more comfortable that these concerns are being seriously considered in project planning and implementation. Good process will also see:

- Improved local community, business and individual understanding of a project;
- Sound knowledge of a project’s impact on that community (positive and potentially negative);
- Information on timelines for all stages of a project; and
- A guarantee that genuine issues will be considered in project planning and implementation.

It is of paramount importance that local stakeholders are given a seat at the table. If these infrastructure projects are occurring in their backyard, appropriate consultation must occur, in order for projects to be planned around a deep understanding of local issues. This will contribute to the overall success of the project. These stakeholders should include local government, key community organisations and peak industry bodies.

In summary, we recommend that regional stakeholders are guaranteed a seat at the table in the planning and implementation process of renewable energy builds.

¹ Norton Rose Fulbright, 2020, ‘Renewables projects must consider community impact’.

Recommendations

RCA is seeking a commitment from the Federal Government to ensure that two key commitments are met as renewable energy projects are rolled out across regional Australia.

1. **Ensure that robust community consultation and best practice engagement is established as a minimum standard** and as a regulatory requirement. This should function as a requirement to any proponents seeking to build renewable projects and transmission lines;
2. **Guarantee a seat at the table for regional stakeholders.** It is of paramount importance that affected stakeholders are given a seat at the decision-making table to ensure social license is obtained, and that benefits and costs are properly considered.

For More Information

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