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OPINION




Karen Chappel: Locals must have input in renewable plans and the answer is blowing in the Wind

Karen Chappel The West Australian

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 It is essential that our local governments are involved from the outset, to help to plan and deliver the infrastructure needed because of these projects. Credit: Jeff Henderson/RegionalHUB

-  *“My Government is committed to transforming Western Australia into a global clean energy powerhouse, providing clean energy for generations to come.”*
-  *Premier Roger Cook, September 30 2024.*
-  Our rural, regional and remote communities are seeing a surge of interest from project proponents eager to establish renewable energy projects.

These projects include wind and solar farms, tree planting for carbon offsets and biodiversity and biofuel production. For example, projects like the Merredin Solar Farm, the Yandin Wind Farm in Dandaragan and the proposed Neoen wind farm in Narrogin. These projects are live or in the planning pipeline right now.

And while society as a whole benefits from the growth of the renewable energy sector, it is regional communities that bear the brunt of the impacts of these projects, such as pressure on housing, the impact on roads and strain on local services and infrastructure.

Local governments want to make sure these projects deliver economic, social and environmental outcomes, providing real and lasting benefits for the local communities that host them.

However, planning regulations and policy settings aren't keeping pace, resulting in projects being considered on an ad-hoc basis. There is no coordinated approach to integrating these investments into existing communities and industries, leaving individual local governments and their communities to "reinvent the wheel" in their efforts to achieve the best outcomes.

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It is essential that our local governments are involved from the outset, to help to plan and deliver the infrastructure needed because of these projects.

We need a Statewide strategy and framework to ensure local communities benefit from these changes and that the industry respects its social licence to operate.

Many of our member councils are deeply concerned about the placement, management and impact of renewable energy projects within their communities – and so are their ratepayers.

Projects may bring short-term benefits during construction, providing jobs, but WALGA is hearing from councils that often the community doesn't benefit long term, with infrastructure, availability of accommodation and amenity all negatively affected.

Small regional local governments can be overwhelmed by extensive planning negotiations with developers on large projects.

Many of these projects are exempt from paying rates. Local residents see lucrative projects planned and built where the impost on communities, including the social impacts, can outweigh the benefits.

Many cite that despite major projects generating power in their area, their own power supplies are not improved.

For years, economic diversification has been an important goal for our State Government.

The Diversify WA strategy, launched in July 2019 under former Premier Mark McGowan, set out an ambitious vision for WA to become a leader in industries such as space, tourism, health and medical science and energy.



 Karen Chappel. Credit: Danella Bevis/Countryman

Premier Roger Cook’s first-ever Leadership Matters breakfast speech – hosted by The West Australian on August 15 this year – focused heavily on “turning the State into a global powerhouse for clean energy...”

And yet we’re still waiting for action. WALGA urges the State Government to step in and ensure the right policy, regulations and standards are put in place to support the transition to renewables.

These projects are moving forward now, and we can’t afford to wait. We need a comprehensive framework to manage the impact of the energy transition and ensure the realisation of community benefits.

We have a significant opportunity to turn this vision into reality, right now. The renewable energy transition is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the State. We only have one chance to get this right.

Local governments must be included in the conversation.

Karen Chappel is President of the West Australian Local Government Association

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