

Due Diligence and Compromise in Communication between Wind Energy Developers and Communities

Jack Brand

Faculty: Professor Deborah Ballard-Reisch, Ph.D.

Master at Arts in Communication Program, Elliott School of Communication

Abstract: Wind Energy is a critical issue in our nation and especially in Kansas. In 2010, a team of graduate students under the supervision of Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) (n=30) and 9 focus groups (n=88) in three Kansas counties (Butler, Kiowa, and Wabaunsee), drawing on three very different contexts for assessing communication issues surrounding such development. The goal of this secondary analysis of research data is to delve more deeply into the specific aspect of the relationships among consultation and information dissemination and community acceptance and involvement, as well as to explore the dichotomy of the perceptions of these issues for decision makers and community members. Data are analyzed using inductive, qualitative thematic analysis.

1. Introduction

US dependence on foreign energy threatens the economy and security of the nation (NRDC, 2004). The Federal Government has outlined a plan to increase US Wind Energy production from 1.8% of the electricity produced in the US as of 2009 to 20% by 2030 (EIA, 2009; EERE, 2008). Kansas ranks 2nd in wind energy production potential in the contiguous US (Lu et al., 2009). This is due to flat terrain unobstructed by natural or man-made barriers to wind. Successful negotiation among wind energy developers, key stakeholders and decision-makers, and rural communities within such areas will be critical to the future of wind energy development. For this reason, the research conducted in fall 2010 is directly relevant to the issue of wind energy development in our nation. This secondary data analysis uses inductive, qualitative, thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to explore key issues in the interaction between decision makers and community members in these vital ecologies, with the goal of finding specific recommendations that can be used in future dialogues.

2. The Study

There was controversy around the development of the wind energy projects studied. In Kiowa County, this was almost invisible and the project was approved. In Butler County controversy was high and only one

location was approved. In Wabaunsee County, the debate resulted in an outright ban on wind energy development. Failure of this project occurred due to community reaction, not lack of developers, lack of land for lease, or lack of funding. In Kiowa County the project was treated as community collaboration from the start. In Butler and Wabaunsee Counties, the pro-development side did not appear to view this as a community issue, and what overtures were made in that direction, were viewed by many as too little or too late. Based on thematic analysis of the KIIs and Focus Groups, findings of this analysis indicate that the debate unfolded differently in the three counties due to contextual differences along three main themes: community notification, community dialogue and community benefit.

3. Results

Theme 1: Informing the Community

In Greensburg, Kiowa County, following the disastrous tornado in May 2007, community meetings were regular, well attended, and highly collaborative. Out of this process came the community consensus to go green. The wind energy proposal was considered consistent with community priorities. Perceptions in Butler County were different. The proposal was described as a “total surprise to the county commission.” The same was noted in Wabaunsee County, with the perception being that by the time the project was publicly known it was moving rapidly, and in secret, or as one respondent put it, “during the dark of night”. The public surprise at these projects, coupled with perception of a corresponding lack of dialogue with the community, resulted in community resistance.

Theme 2: Dialogue with the Community

The Role of Channels

Information about the proposed projects was primarily reported as distributed in meetings held by the city or by either side of the debate. Neither setting proved conducive to community dialogue.

Dichotomy in Perceptions

It is critical to note that even in the two counties where development was highly controversial, the pro-development side did make an effort to engage the general community, using such strategies as announcement of meetings in local newspapers and mailings to residents within 1000 feet of the site. One respondent who was pro-wind energy development said, "I thought we engaged early". Another respondent stated that the "companies involved...thought everyone would be in favor of it (development). They were shocked, dumbfounded, that they had resistance". Given the differing reactions, clearly there is a difference in the perceptions of what due diligence entails between those who proposed the projects and the general community.

Power and Marginalization

In Kiowa County, 10 out of 10 of the Key informant respondents indicated that they thought, "all the interested groups and individuals had a fair amount of input as the project was considered". In Butler County, this was 8 of 10 and in Wabaunsee 2 of 10. Given the varying degrees of public acceptance, this could be taken to indicate a strong correlation between perceived equity of input by the KII participants and community consensus, but what seems like a unanimous voice may actually be the result of marginalization of minority voices. Even in Kiowa, disparities surfaced between the answers to questions pertaining to existence of groups or individuals against the project (8 of 10 mentioned no opposition) and questions pertaining to advice for those against the project, the responses to which typically (7 of 10) shared themes that opposition was caused by misinformation and misunderstanding of the "greater good." A supposedly nonexistent opposition needing advice itself indicates the presence both of that opposition and of marginalization.

Theme 3: Community Benefits

In Kiowa County the wind energy project was perceived as benefiting the community as a whole; the energy generated stayed in Kiowa County; revenue generated benefitted Kiowa County, and jobs created went to residents of Kiowa County. In Butler County, there was concern on the part of those opposed to the project that some of the landowners benefiting from the projects actually resided outside of Butler County. They were described as "absentee landowners" by one respondent. Also, it was mentioned in the KIIs that all of the less than 10 jobs created by the Wind Energy development went to residents outside of Butler County and the power was

sold to Missouri. Still there was a perception that there would be some economic development in the form of payments in lieu of taxes paid to the county. In Wabaunsee there was no such perception. The following quotation taken from a Wabaunsee County KII, illustrates the emotional importance attached to individuals involved in the process residing within the community, "The key individuals (against wind energy development) were the residents and landowners, whose families had been there forever and expect that their grandchildren would be there three generations from now. Families, whose names are recognizable, true stakeholders." In Wabaunsee County, perception was that the benefits would go to only a few residents, and to the Wind Energy Development Company, which was German, with only the negative effects of the development staying in Wabaunsee County.

4. Recommendations

Unless wind energy development is approached with three themes in mind, 1) informing the community early, 2) the necessity of early dialogue, and 3) that the project must be perceived as benefiting the entire community, the project may meet with resistance. In the three examples discussed, the degree of community involvement and the degree of community benefit was inversely related with the degree of resistance. Further, it is important not to mistake early reports of high consensus among highly influential people (KII respondents) as community consensus. Marginalization may have already occurred. If these issues are not addressed, as one respondent noted, "...if the local people think a big company is trying to hoodwink them, they'll probably resist. The purpose of this project is neither to argue for or against wind energy development, but it is too important of an issue to be allowed to fail solely due to secondary issues resulting from counter productive communication strategies.

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