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Wind farm protest fills the Yarram Regent Theatre

29 Oct 2018, 2 p.m.

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HUNDREDS of concerned residents filled the Regent Theatre last Tuesday night to say no to Synergy Wind's proposal to obtain planning approval for 34 wind turbines on farmland alongside the South Gippsland Highway from Hedley to Alberton and in Alberton West.

Convened by the saveyarram.com collective, the meeting heard from speakers who savaged the state Labor government's planning approvals process for wind farms, and later had the audience howling down Gippsland South MLA Danny O'Brien, accusing him of duck-shoving responsibility for representing those who oppose the project.

Among residents most affected by the proposal are Richard and Jaqueline Schneider, who obtained a planning and building permit for the new home in 2009.

"We will have three turbines that are less than a kilometre from our house," Mrs Schneider said.

She said they had to approach Synergy Wind as the firm did not recognise their dwelling as it had not been granted a shire certificate of occupancy.

After initial approaches to the company, she said dialogue had stopped, and they had not heard from it since.

The couple said they had not been offered any compensation and did not want the turbines so close to their house.

However Synergy Wind spokesperson Coralie Spitzner said yesterday there were two, not three turbines proposed to be within one kilometre of the dwelling.

"Synergy Wind was only made aware of this structure late last year and since then has been engaging with the landowners regarding an offer as non-hosting participants.

"The most recent correspondence with them was about two weeks ago."

Ms Spitzner said the development of new clean energy resources was broadly supported in the community and was essential to bringing down energy prices, reducing emissions, and combating climate change.

She said it would create local jobs, flow-on opportunities for local business and suppliers, and provide farmers with income over the long term.

It would also provide access to a community development fund of up to \$80,000 per year.

Ms Spitzer said turbines would only be erected on those properties where landowners had signed an agreement to host turbines.

Gelliondale resident Graeme James said the proposal involved 20-metre tall turbines with 70 metre blades only 3.8 kilometres from Yarram.

He claimed there would be 78 dwellings within one to two kilometres from the turbines, and another 76 dwellings within two to three kilometres.

He said turbines would be located within 50 metres of the Ramsar-listed wetlands and marine national park.

However Ms Spitzer said yesterday the siting of the proposed project was in accordance with local and state planning requirements.

She said taller turbines were more reliable and harvested more energy, and the turbines proposed for the Alberton Wind Farm would have an overall maximum tip height of 200 metres.

She also said the proposed wind farm would be built mostly well away from the Ramsar site (greater than one kilometre).

“Two turbines and associated access tracks and underground power cabling will be located between 500 metres and one kilometre from the Ramsar site boundary at the very eastern end of the project,” she added.

Mr James also predicted a decline in tourism, as the project would require traffic disruptions as turbine tower components were moved into position.

However Ms Spitzer said the experience of other wind farms suggested the proposed Alberton Wind Farm would support tourism.

“A number of wind farms here and overseas are tourism attractions in their own right,” she said.

“In the case of Alberton, the wind farm would complement the existing attractions provided by the rail trail that extends throughout the region, and the coastal areas of Port Albert and Wilsons Promontory.”

She added that as with any infrastructure project, a traffic management plan would be developed in conjunction with the council and VicRoads, to ensure road users were not be adversely affected.

Bald Hills resident John Zakula told of his experience living near the Bald Hills wind farm.

“I and my neighbours compare these sounds inside our homes and it’s a continuous cycling pulsation,” he said.

“You can hear it over the radio, over the television, and then when you put your head to the pillow you can hear this ‘whoop, whoop, whoop’ and it’s very difficult to get to sleep.

“After three or four days you can’t sleep.

“I have to leave my home periodically to get out of the exposure.

“I wake at one, two in the morning and I’m going whoop, whoop, whoop, my heart is racing and I don’t feel very well.

“My head feels like it’s in a state of compression.”

Ms Spitzer said compliance with wind energy facility noise guidelines was compulsory, and monitoring of the Alberton Wind Farm would ensure this.

She pointed to an online Environment Protection Authority fact sheet about wind farms, noise and health, which stated some individuals had a particularly sensitive response to low frequency noise.

“It is unclear what causes this response, but it is likely to be due to a combination of biological, psychological and social factors,” the fact sheet reads.

“Some people have biologically sensitive hearing (in other words, a lower than average hearing threshold).

“However, when tested in the laboratory, few people who are affected by low frequency noise have been found to have particularly sensitive hearing; most have hearing thresholds in the normal range.

“Annoyance increases more rapidly for low frequency sounds, and there is greater variation in how individuals perceive them, because of their narrow audible range.

“This means that some people’s annoyance in response to low frequency noise may not be shared by others.

“This lack of understanding may make them more frustrated and potentially more ‘sensitised’ to the sound...

“Other psychological and social factors, such as anxiety, beliefs about the noise source and the social and environmental context in which the noise occurs, also contribute to annoyance from low frequency noise.”

Gippsland South MLA Danny O’Brien, who had attended the meeting intending to just listen, took exception to moderator Alan McDonald using quotes from emails to him from Mr O’Brien that he felt misrepresented him.

He explained his comment that his opinion on the wind farm was irrelevant did not mean he did not intend to represent locals, but that their views should be their own, not his.

He assured the audience he had written to the Planning Minister regarding the issue and pointed to his press release urging the minister not to make a decision before going into caretaker mode.

This was, however, not enough for a vocal section of the audience who yelled that Mr O’Brien had not listened to their objections and had ignored their letters on the issue, responding instead with media releases regarding the Bald Hills wind farm.

The meeting continued beyond 9pm, with a number locals voicing their rejection of scientific studies into climate change, the direction of government policy and the accountability of politicians.