

# WINDLETTER

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## **SMALL TURBINE COLUMN:**

### **Planning Your Wind System—Working With Your Neighbors**

**--Mick Sagrillo, Sagrillo Power & Light**

You may not be aware of it, but the most powerful person in your neighborhood is inevitably someone you angered eight years ago when you trimmed a branch from his or her tree that was overhanging a sidewalk, smacking passers-by in the face. At the time, you thought you were doing the community a service by taking care of a nuisance situation. That “good deed” is now coming back to bite you quite hard because you did not consult the tree’s owner before taking action. Your angry neighbor has showed up at the building permit hearing for your wind turbine to vocally oppose its construction. You’re doomed!

Sound like an “urban legend”. Don’t dismiss such a scenario. While the above anecdote was fabricated, far more ludicrous situations have actually played themselves out in real life, stymieing the most well-planned garage or deck construction project.

A zoning or building permit hearing in the U.S. is an interesting event, and I encourage everyone to attend one sometime before they die just to see local “democracy” in action. In all other areas of our society, an “accused” stands as innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Not so in a zoning hearing. One neighbor can raise concerns about your construction project to the zoning committee for no other reason than they don’t want to look at it, and you will likely be sent home empty-handed of the required building permit. If you argue your case, the burden of proof is on you to convincingly counter whatever innuendo your irate neighbor has raised, regardless of how ludicrous it is.

### **What makes people tick?**

When you take the time to consider a neighbor’s perspective, though, it really should be no surprise that you may get some strong reactions to your plans. Your building application is no different than any other building project in the neighborhood, and reactions will be similar.

First and foremost, no one likes surprises in their back yard. A home is a refuge—a “castle,” a “cocoon,” a place of comfort, safety, peace, and quiet. Or, at least, that’s how most of us view where we live. The last thing you want “in your back yard” is a mini-mart or dog kennel. As such, there will always be serious resistance to anything that is new and different or perceived as a threat to one’s “safe harbor.”

Second, we all form opinions on just about everything we encounter in life. Once formed, those opinions are not easily changed, regardless of the facts. Opinions need not be rational for a person to espouse them quite vocally in public. But due to today's muddled media coverage, the line has been blurred between fact and opinion. A classic example of this is a "fair and balanced" interview with a credentialed scientist citing peer-reviewed statistics about global climate change, followed by a coal company public relations firm voicing an "opposing viewpoint" based on the economic interests of their fossil-fuel company client.

Third, due to the widespread use of the Internet, misinformation on just about any topic you can think of is pervasive and widespread, and not easily countered once it is in the public arena. All too many people lack the critical thinking skills required to help them differentiate between fact and fabrication. After all, if it's on the Internet, it must be true. As an example, many people recite such gems as "the Great Wall of China is the only man-made structure visible from space." In fact, many human structures—cities, highways and dams to name a few—are visible from orbit.

### **Controlling Your Destiny**

So, how do you proceed? How do you make sure that you will actually secure the building permit you need in order to install your wind system?

Take control of the situation rather than letting the chips fall where they may. You will need to start working on your neighborhood well before you even get estimates for the wind system. Get out and meet your neighbors if you haven't already done so. Invite them over sometime for snacks and beer. The familiar face of a "nice guy" or "nice gal" is much harder to argue against than a complete stranger.

Broach tangential topics during these social gatherings, or even during chance encounters. Talk about the rising cost of gas and electricity, mercury pollution of our lakes due to burning coal to generate electricity, global climate change, the risk of nuclear energy, habitat destruction if we open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or threats to homeland security when we are dependant on others for our energy needs. Look for common interests, similar concerns. Then raise the idea of generating electricity from renewables such as wind and solar—maybe, someday. Emphasize that wind is part of the solution to our energy needs. All of this helps your neighbors to formulate opinions about you and your interests while you open up future possibilities.

As you investigate turbine and tower possibilities, share your findings with your new acquaintances. Get their input. They will have lots of questions, which offers you two opportunities. The first is the ability to answer their questions with facts and real data instead of having them grope around on the Internet, not quite sure what they are looking for, or worse, stumbling upon whatever misinformation they find on some anti-wind farm Web site. The second opportunity is for more interaction with the very people whose support you most need. Whatever you do, don't deceive your neighbors or make something up when you do not know the answer. Both are transparent, will sour the relationship, and tarnish any support you might have garnered in short order. Offer to find out the answers to their questions and get back to them with the results of your research. Then do it.

## **The art of friendly persuasion**

Anytime you report your research findings to their questions, get an impression of what your neighbors are thinking. Are they enthusiastic enough that they want their own wind generator? If so, offer to help them with the process. Are they still sitting on the fence, not proponents but not opponents either? Have they already hired an attorney to take you and your hair-brained idea to court? You might consider moving, or abandoning the idea unless you are willing to permanently alienate your neighbors with your renewable aspirations.

The biggest group, and the ones that will need the most attention, are the folks who have not yet formed an opinion, neither pro nor con. They will likely have some questions and concerns about your wind turbine, and it is in your best interest to ferret these out and address them. Are they concerned about sound? Get the sound reports from the manufacturer of the turbine you are considering. Better yet, find a similar turbine and let them know where it is so that they can listen to it themselves. Are they concerned about a threat to birds or wildlife? Allay these fears with information from any number of environmental organizations, which endorse wind power over fossil-fueled electric generation.

Most concerns are legitimate, if for no other reason than the person raising the issue does not know the answer, and, as such, need to be addressed seriously. In fact, this is your responsibility, as well as in your self-interest to address the questions and concerns before someone else does. Many people will never have encountered a small wind turbine before, or if they did, it was in the early 1980s, the era of wind experimentation. Today's small wind turbines bear as much resemblance to the turbines of 25 years ago as today's cars represent automotive technology from that earlier period.

Some concerns, however, are not legitimate, based instead on hype and instilling fear, the forte` of the anti-wind farm websites. Are they concerned about becoming epileptic after looking at the spinning blades? Or are they concerned about stray voltage, ice flying from blades, or other such ruses? Regardless, never mock the person raising the question, as they are simply looking for answers and assurances that what you are proposing is really a good idea. Their concerns, provided they are based in reality, are just as legitimate as your convictions about renewable energy. A great place to get information to share with neighbors and zoning officials on all manner of issues raised at zoning hearings is RENEW Wisconsin's Small Wind Toolbox at <http://www.renewwisconsin.org/wind/windtoolbox.html> . Particularly helpful are the folders titled "Fact Sheets" and "Information for Homeowners and Installers." These short pieces on individual issues about small wind turbines were created to counter innuendo and rumor and are easily digestible in a short time, such as at a zoning hearing.

## **Give and take**

There may be issues brought up by neighbors that you have some control over by offering a compromise. For example, an adjoining neighbor may show up at your building permit hearing and raise concerns about aesthetics or sound because of the proximity of your proposed turbine and tower to his or her house. By being prepared to move the tower further away from the concerned party, you offer a reasonable solution to the zoning committee. If

the neighbor objects to the color of the wind turbine, offer to paint it. Guarantee that you will not use the tower to hang advertising signs or billboards. Anything you can offer in public demonstrates that you are a responsible citizen by being willing to compromise. To a point. Offering to install a 30-foot tower amid 60-foot trees so that your neighbor will not have to look at the turbine is counterproductive, to say the least. You need to explain, forcefully, why such a solution is unacceptable.

If you have made any allies during your preparatory visits with neighbors, ask them to either attend the hearing in your support, or send a letter supporting your request for a building permit to the committee considering your application. Zoning officials are nose counters. If the number opposing you outnumber you and your supporters at the hearing, even though the vast bulk of your neighbors either support you or don't care one way or another, you will not get the permit you need. It is imperative that you enlist allies to voice their opinions in public. As Napoleon Bonaparte said, "Ten people who speak make more noise than ten thousand who are silent." Don't ever allow yourself to be outnumbered.

### **You're not done yet**

Months have gone by. You've done your homework, answered numerous questions to both the curious as well as the concerned, attended your zoning hearing and successfully secured a building permit, installed your wind turbine and tower, and are generating pollution-free kilowatt hours of electricity. You still have one more task to complete. It's called "an open house." Invite your neighbors over to see your installation; perhaps they will even be able to watch the utility meter spin backwards while enjoying more snacks and beers. Or volunteer your home for the American Solar Energy Society's annual Solar Tour of Homes, held the first weekend of every October. The point is to give people the opportunity to see a wind turbine up close, and to ask even more questions. Familiarity fosters a certain comfort level, and assures your neighbors that a small wind turbine is not a threat. While you're at it, invite the local newspaper over to do a local-interest story.

These follow-up activities will help pave the way for others who wish to pursue their own wind systems.

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*Editor's note: The opinions expressed in this column are the author's and may not reflect those of AWEA's staff or board.*