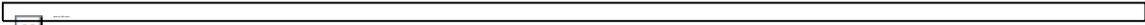


 **ADVICE FROM AN EXPERT**
by Mick Sagrillo



Zoning II

KEEPING ZONING HEARINGS UNDER CONTROL

[Zoning I](#) | [Zoning II](#) | [Zoning III](#) | [Zoning IV](#)

In my last column, I described some of the objections from the public that were raised during zoning hearings for two Wisconsin utility-proposed wind farms in my township. This column will lay out some lessons learned from those hearings that can be used by anyone applying for a wind turbine construction permit.

Quite often, someone requesting a building permit for a small turbine will need a variance from local zoning ordinances before beginning the project. By all means, secure the required permits before purchasing the equipment. Zoning committees who feel slighted that you took their approval for granted are more likely to take a harder look at your project than if you had come to them first.

While not necessarily what they should be, zoning hearings quite often turn out to be popular referendums on an issue, or even an individual landowner. Alienate your neighbors, and you will inevitably lose every time. Therefore, your primary strategy should be one of public relations.

Zoning officials live in your neighborhood and must answer to the local community. Discussions are not limited to your zoning hearing. They will take place in the officials' respective churches, down at the feedmill or hardware store, and in the local tavern or restaurant. You will be talked about. Use this to your advantage.

Talk up your project with key neighbors well in advance to applying for the zoning permit. Answer questions in a friendly, non-judgmental manner. Allay fears by distributing appropriate articles on wind turbines or equipment specifications whenever the opportunity arises. Invite potential advocates to appear at the zoning hearing to speak on your behalf.

If possible, get your local newspaper to do a story on your proposed wind turbine. You can actually write and submit your own press release. Include as many facts and benefits as you can, explaining why wind turbines are a good idea. Stay away from any negative aspects of the project. People really do believe what they see in print, so use this to your advantage.

When it comes time for your zoning hearing, get as many local supporters for your project to the meeting as possible. Again, zoning hearings are not supposed to be popularity contests, but committee members can certainly count those opposed to a

project in an audience versus those in favor.

Many times, meetings will get out of hand due to an especially vocal attendee who has no respect for the rules or process. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that local zoning committee members rarely have training in how to facilitate meetings. Things often go from bad to worse as a shouting match ensues and mob rule takes over. If this happens, calmly suggest that the meeting be continued when an outside neutral facilitator can preside over the hearing. Do this carefully so that you do not make the zoning committee look bad in public. Make it clear, however, that "mob rule" is not in anyone's best interest and is not acceptable.

At the zoning hearing, it is imperative that you immediately respond to all wild claims or accusations based on hearsay about wind generators to clear up any misconceptions. Instant rebuttal is critical if you are to keep unfounded fears from becoming perceived truth. You control the flow of information. Don't let things get out of hand. Wild claims and hearsay should be identified as what they are. Make it clear that the burden of proof for the validity of such claims is on the accuser and not on you.

One thing you can do is to have individual fact sheets ready to distribute about issues that may be raised. These can include such topics as property values, noise, bird kills, lightning, TV reception, or any other topic of concern that arises during your pre-application PR campaign. Long involved articles will probably not get read. A few paragraphs on a page by an independent authority are sufficient. Also, point out the difference between your authoritative articles and any popular press "Readers' Digest" type of articles brought in by opponents.

If an important question comes up that you do not have the answer to or any documentation for, ask that the meeting be continued if it looks like approval hinges on that point. If need be, get someone to the meeting to support your position. For example, a cell phone technician can attest to the fact that towers do not cause TV or radio interference. Agricultural agents and university extension specialists can also be helpful independent "experts."

Address delaying tactics by opponents by suggesting "homework" responsibilities with due dates for yourself or the zoning committee members. This will keep the process moving. In the meantime, you can lobby committee members by discussing any apprehensions they might have about your project. These discussions will also give you an idea of what additional information you may need to provide the zoning committee to help them decide in your favor.

-- Mick Sagrillo, Sagrillo Power & Light Co.

Back to: [Advice from an Expert](#)

[Wind Energy FAQ](#) | [Publications](#) | [AWEA Home Page](#)

© 2000 by the American Wind Energy Association.

May be freely distributed provided this notice is included.

All other rights reserved.