



# MAYORAL COLUMN: 29 MARCH 2023

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## COUNCIL'S ROLE IN RENEWABLE ENERGY

Over the last couple of months and especially since the close of submissions for the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Winterbourne Wind Project I have heard and read a lot of comment about where your Council stands in relation to both the Voluntary Planning Agreement (VPA), sometimes called the Community Benefit Fund, and the Road Infrastructure Agreement (RIA).

Firstly, Walcha Council has not signed off on either of these documents. VPAs are described as "Negotiated between a Developer and a Council, for the provision of infrastructure to support communities". VESTAS has presented both Uralla and Walcha Councils with a draft VPA and we are currently reviewing that document. It can be noted that in VESTAS public information the offer is \$1,000,000 on financial close and \$750,000 for 600 Megawatt plus an extra \$1,000 for every additional MW annually when generation starts. If the project is successful in moving forward there are varying start dates but it may be two years at least.

Whatever name they go by these forms of community compensation are nothing new. They exist in some form in the mining industry, large developments and many other projects.

Currently Walcha Council and VESTAS have a very respectful engagement in all areas of this project and the negotiation around this VPA should be the same. Obviously the more we can extract the better for our community and VESTAS have a commercial pathway to follow.

While the funding amount is important there is a lot of background negotiations that form how the agreement works for the life of the project. This structure is yet to be finalised but we will keep you updated on the proposal and place it on public display for your input.

Obviously, the RIA is a much more complicated document and we are relying on assistance from Coalition of Renewable Energy Mayors, our engineers and the Department of Planning for experience in this area. We have spoken to Councils who have not had watertight agreements and have paid the price. The Oxley Highway from Bendemeer to the Saleyards is a Transport for NSW issue but we take over from there and have a minimum of 70kms of roads, culverts and bridges to protect. Depending on where water, gravel, sand etc are sourced could mean more of our local roads come into play.

Last week Interim General Manager Phil Hood and myself had a zoom meeting with Clay Preshaw and Nicole Brewer from the Department of Planning & Environment (DPIE) and they are very open to information sharing and answering our questions. I believe we have a very respectful and open dialogue with both "The Department" and



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VESTAS. Council's neutral position on Winterbourne Wind does not mean we will not disagree or defend what we see our community needs. Moving forward each project will be assessed by Council on its merits. There has been a lot of discussion around the number of submissions that each "side" received. DPIE made it plain that only relevant and informed submissions are taken into account. The pathway for these projects is well worn and does not work on emotion.

A quick update on the progress through DPIE. Currently VESTAS is responding to submissions and as was indicated in our Zoom session there has been an extension of time granted because there were so many. When DPIE are satisfied they will make a recommendation to the Independent Planning Commission who will once again engage with our community in Walcha before determining the outcome. While they will not put a timeline on this it could take a while.

## **TAXI**

It was a pity to see a *Thumbs Down* to our Taxi service last week. What is probably one of the greatest social assets for our community, it delivers far and beyond what it is obliged to do. To drop patrons, who are sometimes frail or elderly outside the door of the business they wish to enter, wait for them and help them back in defines what special people they are. The service has probably saved licences, marriages and maybe even lives. Available 24 hours a day and always with a smile. Julie, Mick and your drivers, thank you for your service. This community appreciates it. If anyone deserves a Thumbs Down maybe it should be the people who park in their designated park.

## **SKATE PARK**

Disappointing too was the *Thumbs Down* to the Skate Park. There was a lot of public engagement in this process and Council's Manager – Project Delivery negotiated strongly with the project designers to bring the local input to the table. The "focus more on younger children" is about adding areas for them and not taking away from older children who have also had items added for them. It will be a great facility suited to all ages and encouraging families to visit.

**Clr Eric Noakes**  
**Mayor of Walcha**