

Tues. March 15th, 2016 Ontario's power system operator on how it chose wind project sites

– CBC interview – Shawn Conkwright (IESO's director of renewable procurement) & Alan Neal

So wind power could be coming to a town near you. Ontario's power system operator has announced sixteen contracts for large renewable energy projects. Many see it as a positive move toward a greener, cleaner province. But some communities – such as people in Nation and North Stormont, which are getting wind projects – say that their voices were ignored and wind power is being forced on them.

The Independent Electricity System Operator manages Ontario's power needs, and our next guest, Shawn Conkwright, is the IESO's director of renewable procurement. We've reached him on the phone, "Hello there".

IESO – Hello Alan, how are you doing today?

I'm ok. How did you pick which projects would be approved?

IESO – So this process to select winning projects has actually spanned about 3 years and as part of that, we did a 2 stage competitive procurement process of which we laid out publicly in available documents, exactly the criteria that we would be using to select the winners, so both those competing for projects as well as interested members of the public, stakeholders and so on, all have had and continue to have access to the documents we used to pick the winners.

And so when you talked to stakeholders, what did you hear?

IESO – So the IESO went out in 2013 & 14 – we went across the province and talked about how we could improve our procurement process for large renewable projects and what we heard from people was: that they wanted to know about the projects early, have an awareness of what projects were being considered, have an opportunity to ask questions, have an opportunity to shape what those projects might look like, and also that we would have some mechanism to try to gauge community support as part of our process.

But what about when the community has said, "No, we don't want this here?"

IESO – So what we are trying to balance is the province's goal of getting to 20,000MW of renewable supply by 2025, and we have to balance that with the challenges of any type of large infrastructure project – renewables are no different – so what we tried to do was come up with really 2 levels of evaluating support. The 1st was engagement – and trying to make sure that everybody proposing a project had to disclose their project – particulars, details, host a public meeting, meet with Municipal Officials, and so on, to make sure that those folks were aware of it, and then we provided an incentive mechanism to try to encourage developers to work with and partner with their local communities and elected officials, so we gave a point score system for doing that.

OK, but they didn't have to work with communities? I understand that they got points for it but (IESO - "so") it wasn't necessary?

IESO – So, so there was a very high minimum mandatory that they all had to do and that was around engaging, the support piece was a point system and scoring more points has the impact of lowering their effective price. So, it was certainly advantageous for them to do that and we found the majority of projects did do exactly that, working with either their municipal first nation communities or their abutting landowners.

I'd like you to listen to what North Stormont mayor Dennis Fife had to say this weekend. Here he is: "Well I was quite surprised because back in July of 2015, council passed a motion to be a non-willing host for wind turbines. I really thought that the province of Ontario would listen to the will of the people and put wind turbines where municipalities wanted them but, it didn't happen that way."

Now the Nation also declared itself an un-willing host. Mayor Francois St. Amour says that 80% of his constituents were against a wind power project. How do you justify allowing an energy project in a community that doesn't want it?

IESO – Well again, we're tasked with energy supply and demand conservation for the entire province and that means that at the end of the day the infrastructure has to go somewhere and again we've tried to encourage development of projects where it's supported. One of the things that we found though when we did our engagement activities and this was coming back was that you know, elected officials in some cases can pass either support or against those projects, but another important piece was that the actual local abutting landowners was, was important as well. So, we've seen cases where projects were supported by their adjacent landowners and not by their municipality or conversely by the municipality and not by the adjacent landowners, so it's a complicated matter but I think we tried to factor in multiple ways to gauge that support and overall I think we're pretty happy that developers went out and tried to, to engage honestly with those communities.

But weren't there other communities who actually/ that actually wanted to host these, that would have made more sense to go to?

IESO – So there certainly are communities that pass support resolutions, some of which were successful on the project list. I think one of the things to keep in mind though is we're doing large scale public procurement. It has to withstand the scrutiny of those types of processes of fairness, openness and transparency so, we determined, with input, what the evaluation criteria are and then those criteria are set. We can't waver or change them at the last minute just because of something that's sort of happening so, we have to say what it is we're going to do, seek input on it – developers in good faith, submit proposals on that basis, and then we have to evaluate them against the metrics we've set out.

But do you think it was clear to the communities that they could end up with these, these projects, regardless of if they wanted them?

IESO – Yah, this has been one area that's certainly created a lot of um, you know questions since the Green Energy Act came into effect in 2009 and again, when you listen to comments made by the province, ah again, it's clear that they're trying to balance cleaning and making the electricity system more renewable – trying to take into account local preferences where possible, but again at the end of

the day, as a province being responsible for that energy supply. And the, the ah, competitive procurement documents did not speak to an unwilling host (um) declaration or not. We know that there's lots of communities that have passed those, but there's also a need to put the infrastructure into the province.

I mean the reasons though, why these communities don't want wind farms – I mean we've, we've heard or wind power projects - we've heard, from a variety of reasons, it's not simply just a matter of inconvenience, there are some environmental concerns about how they are installed, how the effect on wildlife around them, there's a wide range of reasons for that. Can, can the community still have a say as to, and to change any of this now?

IESO – So what we've done as a contracting agency is award contracts to supply the electricity. The regulatory agency, the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change, is responsible for the permitting so, any of these projects, whether it be wind, solar, hydroelectric or bio-energy, all must complete a renewable energy approval, which again provides multiple opportunities for the public to comment on specific aspects, including the items you talked about whether it be wildlife, environment and so on, so that's a separate regulatory process that (um) applies to both energy projects and other types of projects and every project that's been awarded a contract must satisfactorily complete that, before they're able to, to move forward with, with building their projects.

But getting people to comment on something isn't the same as actually addressing those concerns. I mean I can come to a meeting and say I have concerns about birds in my area and the company can say, "Uh huh, yes you do", checkmark, and hand it back over and say, "we definitely heard their concerns."

IESO – And I understand the concern – that's not how the regulatory process works. So, if someone has concerns about, in your example, birds, or about turtles or fauna or whatever it may be, those concerns are raised before that environmental process and that can be - there's a decision made and ultimately that can be appealed, and we've seen examples in Ontario to date, where concerns such as wildlife have been taken and caused either projects to be resized, moved from any potentially environmentally sensitive areas or in some cases, not move forward at all. So we've seen examples of that.

Shawn Conkwright, thanks for your time today.

IESO – Great - thanks a lot for having me.

That's Shawn Conkwright, the ISEO's director of renewable procurement.

Thoughts on what he had to say, "All in a Day" at CBC.ca or tweet...

We did reach out to energy minister, Bob Chiarelli who was not available for an interview, either yesterday or today.