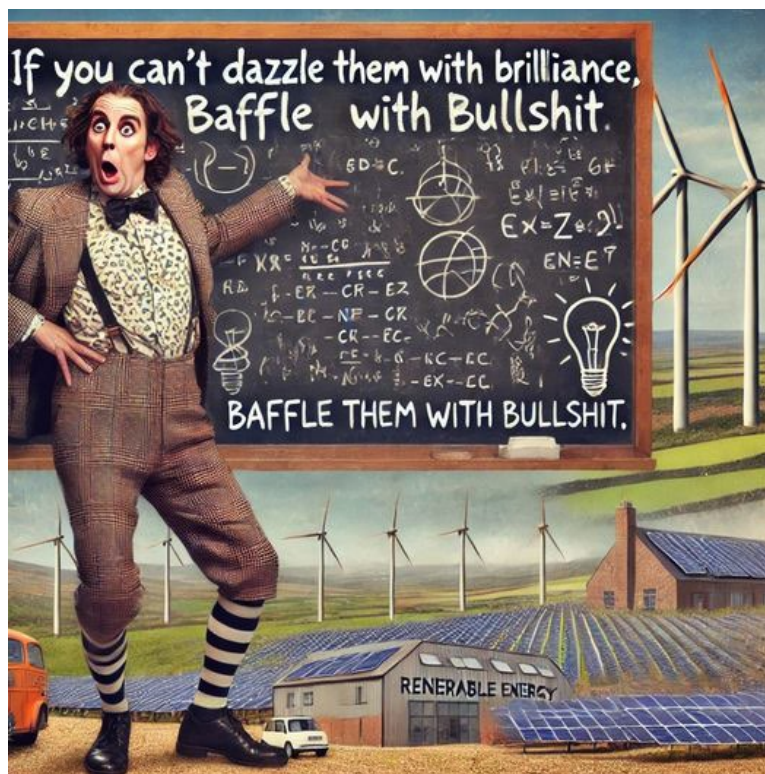


Renewable Energy Developers Are Failing Our Communities - Why NIMBY Concerns Matter More Than You Think

Renewable energy is crucial to reducing our carbon footprint and addressing climate change. However, the way renewable energy developers handle community engagement often leaves much to be desired. While developers frequently express their commitment to community involvement, recent findings suggest a different reality. According to a 2024 study from UC Berkeley titled *“Halfway Up the Ladder: Developer Practices and Perspectives on Community Engagement for Utility-Scale Renewable Energy in the United States,”* developers seem more interested in going through the motions than actually hearing us out.



Developers' Minimal Approach to Community Engagement

When developers step into a community, they seem to treat “engagement” as just another checkbox on their project checklist. According to the UC Berkeley study *“Developer Perceptions of Most Appropriate Engagement,”* most developers

see engagement as a one-way street, where they gather just enough information from the public to “inform” their decisions. As the study politely puts it, *“These results provide evidence that most project developers prefer engagement as primarily a one-way process in which the public is a potential source of information that may inform project siting or design, but there is minimal support for a version of engagement in which the public meaningfully participates in decision making.”* In other words, they’re happy to listen – as long as it doesn’t interfere with their plans.

It turns out that developers interpret “appropriate engagement” as anything that avoids hiccups in their project timeline. That might mean hosting a few informational sessions or taking a key landowner out for an expensive dinner (which, as the Berkeley study notes, they seem to believe counts as “inclusive” engagement). By focusing on a select few landowners, developers conveniently avoid dealing with the broader community’s concerns. It’s amazing how much easier “community engagement” becomes when you only talk to people who are already on board.

According to the UC Berkeley study, developers allocate a mere fraction of their budgets to community engagement. For context, typical construction costs for utility-scale renewable energy projects are around \$1.3 million per MW for solar and \$1.6 million per MW for wind. With developers dedicating only 0.1% of that to community engagement, we’re talking about \$1,300 per MW for solar and \$1,600 per MW for wind. It’s good to know where their priorities really lie.

And why would they bother with anything more? Here in Ohio, the Ohio Power Siting Board rarely denies these projects. With such a compliant regulatory environment, developers don’t exactly feel pressured to win over the community. They know the Board has their back, so why bother with genuine community support?

Waiting Until It’s Too Late - Engaging Communities Only After Key Decisions Are Made

As if their approach to engagement weren’t “thoughtful” enough, many developers delay their public engagement efforts until after they’ve already secured land, finalized project designs, and obtained permits. The UC Berkeley study shows that by the time public meetings occur, most of the important decisions have already been made. Why wait? Because if residents only find out when it’s too late to change anything, there’s less opportunity for us to throw a wrench in their plans.

This approach leaves communities feeling “backed into a corner,” a sentiment that Sun Tzu famously warned against. When people feel trapped with no other options, they fight back with unexpected strength. Developers might want to take a page from Sun Tzu: if you want to avoid resistance, maybe don’t leave people feeling like their

only choice is to resist. By limiting our input to a formality after decisions are locked in, developers shouldn't be surprised if communities respond with intense opposition.

The NREL study also notes that this delayed engagement creates a “reactive” model of community relations. By the time residents are brought into the conversation, many feel they're only there to rubber-stamp decisions already made. It's interesting how developers seem to talk about “community-based planning” yet consistently prioritize their own timelines and interests over those of the actual community.

NIMBY - A Legitimate Response, Not Just a Roadblock

Developers love to throw around the term “NIMBY” (Not In My Backyard), as though it's a dirty word that means we're selfish or uninformed. To them, if you don't want a sprawling industrial project next to your home, you're just a “NIMBY” with no appreciation for the greater good. However, both the UC Berkeley and NREL studies have found that this perception couldn't be further from the truth. In reality, “NIMBY” reactions are often based on well-founded concerns about property values, environmental impacts, and the overall character of the community.

The UC Berkeley study even references two key studies that debunk the notion that NIMBY opposition stems from misinformation. One of these studies, *“Understanding Public Opposition to Wind Development: Real Concerns or Imagined Objections?”* by Wolsink (2007), found that most community concerns are valid, rooted in the specific impacts of projects on the local area. Another, *“Community Perceptions and Acceptance of Large-Scale Solar Projects: The Role of Trust and Transparency”* by Firestone et al. (2018), reveals that opposition often arises from a lack of trust in developers' transparency. It turns out we're not just complaining for the sake of it; we actually have real, substantive concerns.

Meanwhile, the NREL study suggests that developers' assumptions about NIMBY groups being “uninformed” are a critical misstep. The study notes, *“NIMBY opposition frequently stems from well-informed, rational concerns, particularly around transparency, property values, and local environmental impacts.”* Yet developers continue to dismiss us, apparently preferring to believe we're just too dense to understand what's best for us.

And it's not like we have the resources or time to “keep up” with everything these developers are doing. Unlike the renewable energy industry, most of us don't have millions of dollars, teams of experts, or endless hours to devote to analyzing project blueprints. Instead, we're out here sacrificing time with our families, digging through limited information, trying to piece together enough knowledge to make informed

decisions. It's amazing that developers can't see the sacrifices we're making just to stay involved in a process that affects our lives.

The Pitfalls of Token Engagement: A Case of Social Injustice

The UC Berkeley study reveals a concerning trend: many developers approach community engagement as a mere formality rather than a sincere effort to involve communities in decision-making. Instead of true collaboration, they engage in “tokenism”—engaging just enough to tick a box, but not enough to make a meaningful impact. The study notes, *“These results provide evidence that most project developers prefer engagement as primarily a one-way process in which the public is a potential source of information that may inform project siting or design, but there is minimal support for a version of engagement in which the public meaningfully participates in decision making.”*

Token engagement is not only dismissive but also reinforces an unhealthy power imbalance between developers and local residents. By appearing to “engage” the community, developers can claim they're being transparent and inclusive, all while ignoring most of the input they receive. This approach feels more like a superficial PR exercise than an attempt to foster real partnership. Rather than building trust, tokenism tends to breed further mistrust, leaving residents feeling marginalized and exploited in the process.

The UC Berkeley study recommends a shift away from tokenism and toward engagement that actually respects community input. Only by giving communities a genuine voice—and by making real changes based on their concerns—can developers hope to avoid the widespread opposition and resentment their current methods often provoke.

Moving Forward - Genuine Engagement Must Become the Standard, Not the Exception

Both the UC Berkeley and NREL studies suggest that developers should probably rethink their approach to community engagement if they actually want real community support. Those of us who find ourselves opposing these developments would certainly agree—meaningful engagement isn't just a box to check, but a necessary part of building projects that people can actually support.

Perhaps developers could stop treating communities as mere project sites or, worse, as games to be won with selective messaging and misinformation. Maybe, just maybe, they could start to see us as genuine partners in the process. To do that, they need to

actually listen to—and hear—what residents have to say, taking our concerns seriously rather than brushing them off as NIMBY complaints.

True engagement means giving communities a real say in decisions, not just when it's convenient or when they need local buy-in. It means making sure public input shapes project siting, design, and overall approach from the beginning, rather than being tacked on as a formality after the big decisions are already made. And it means considering the public interest, need, necessity, and supporting social justice in a way that respects our health, safety, and continued enjoyment of our property.

We're not opposed to renewable energy; most of us understand its importance. We're opposed to developments that ignore our voices and place their interests above our wellbeing. Responsible, community-centered projects are something we can get behind. But we're not going to stand by while developers steamroll over our homes, our livelihoods, our sanctuaries, and our heritage.

At the end of the day, it's our home, our way of life, and our community that these projects affect. We're the ones who will live with the impacts—not just for a few years, but for decades, often 30, 35, or even 40 years. If developers want our support, they need to start showing us the respect of genuine engagement. Otherwise, they can expect us to keep standing up for our communities—and against their projects—until they learn how to truly work with us, not against us.