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Alert to Renewable Energy Developers

Don't be lulled into a false sense of "development complacency" by New York's new renewable energy siting law.

-15 Steps You Should Take to Ensure A Successful Renewable Energy Project-

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As a longtime advocate of renewable energy, I was pleased to see New York adopt a new, streamlined siting process for large-scale renewables. The Accelerated Renewable Energy Growth and Community Benefit Act, dubbed "94-c," promises to fast track siting and cultivate shovel-ready renewable energy development sites in order to meet the state's decarbonization goals.

Before popping the champagne and dreaming of renewable energy project celebration parades throughout the state, I caution you to temper your expectations and consider this recently [published story](#). It covers a proposed wind project in Western New York—and the new 94-c siting law--that is receiving significant public blowback. It serves as a harbinger of what is to come.

Having spent countless hours in upstate NY communities over the past two decades doing public outreach to advance wind and solar energy projects, I can tell you that most rural places that serve as good sites for renewable energy also embrace politics that are often in direct opposition to Albany's edicts. The sense that rural upstate is being exploited to advance a downstate-dominated state government agenda is prevalent and pervasive. And there is a lot of built-up anger as a result.

So, while policy gurus may laud a new law accelerating renewables, the significant expansion of state authority may have the unintended effect of making local governments and community activists dig in their heels deeper in opposition to some projects. To be sure, the new law includes provisions to override local control, but I've never been involved in a project where dogged opposition didn't find creative ways to impede progress. From chaining themselves across entrance roads to filing sophisticated Article 78 assertions focused on procedural deficiencies, there are always ways for dedicated opponents to impact projects.

So, what do developers need to ensure they are not stuck in the middle of Albany versus local community hostilities?

They need a well-crafted, multi-faceted, strategic public outreach program such as those Power Communications develops for our energy clients. To help our clients deliver successful projects, we:

1. Determine when your project will be public information and work backward from that point to do the needed pre-public outreach and preparation.
2. Hit the ground early and seek out key stakeholders to gain their insight. Work with people you can trust to quietly float the project idea and get their input. Ask them for referrals to other trustworthy local leaders.
3. Craft a cogent message that assures local citizens, public officials and news media that you are in the due-diligence phase and discussion of project details are premature until the plan is complete. Use this holding statement for inquiries prior to your public announcement. It's not about hiding your project- it's about refining its scope and content before it goes public.



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4. Internalize local concerns and community needs. Continue to refine your project around them. It is important people know they are being heard, even if you can't address everything. Demonstrate that you're listening.
5. Explore social media content about the host community and the emergence of digital chatter about your project. Develop a plan to proactively advance your project and mitigate opposition in the social media arena.
6. Prepare clear, concise collateral materials (fact sheets, FAQs, issue papers) to tell your project's story effectively. Develop a project-specific web presence with public email and phone numbers for anyone with questions. If someone has an issue, this allows them to convey it to you, where it can be considered and addressed. Without such avenues, tension tends to increase and, more than likely, lead to complaints to local public officials, which never helps your situation.
7. Reach out to adjoining project neighbors. These are often the individuals to which regulators pay the most attention. They are also most likely to have issues and concerns. Make sure they have clear channels of communications to you. Listen to their concerns and address as fully as possible.
8. Craft the public announcement of your project carefully to address issues gleaned during your due diligence. Convey avenues for public feedback and the willingness to engage in two-way dialogue. Map out the permitting process and the opportunities for public input, so people don't get nervous. The train has left the station. Go the extra yard and have project supporters aware of the announcement ahead-of-time and prepped to respond to the first round of media coverage.
9. Provide key local media with advance notice of your announcement, including details and potential contacts for their stories. This sets up a positive working relationship that will pay dividends over the ensuing years of project media coverage.
10. Once the project is public, start your outreach roadshow. Create a standard project presentation and brief anyone (within reason) who is interested in your project. To maximize your resources, focus first on foundational groups within a community that will reach the most people who matter (fire companies, senior groups, Rotary clubs, Kiwanis, etc.) These people tend to be reasonable, make up the fabric of a community and often become your greatest project ambassadors.
11. Reach out and brief groups and individuals whose agendas align with your project (generally environmental, agricultural and economic development groups). They have skin in the game and can be your most ardent supporters.
12. Plan ways to keep you visible and available, including attending regular town or village board meetings to provide briefings and field questions. Your project should be viewed as a neighbor, not a nuisance. People don't want to feel like you just did a "fly-by." They want a long-term relationship. Done correctly, you should become a "member of the community."
13. Plan and hold multiple informational open houses where you bring together your subject matter experts for the community to come and interact with and ask questions. Create informational boards and make sure your event is well publicized. When well executed, the informational open house can be your most powerful tool for demonstrating the thought and consideration that goes into a major energy project. Hey, you're paying for all this talent, let the community see that these projects take a lot more than one person in a pickup truck.



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14. Develop a policy for local contributions and execute it. Such a policy allows you to focus your efforts on causes that align with your corporate mission and, just as importantly, provide a legitimate reason for not funding every request that comes your way (and there will be many).
15. Once the project is permitted, focus attention on all those people and groups who supported it along the way. Humility and grace go a long way toward maintaining good relations through the inevitably disruptive construction process and years of harmonious operations.

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