



## ***SITING A **GREENER**, SMARTER ELECTRIC SYSTEM***

By Heather Conover, Mary Harman and Lydia Pastuszek

The term “clean energy” is increasingly becoming part of the daily lexicon of business and government throughout the New England region and across the nation. The possibilities of smart grids and greener electricity, as well as concerns about global warming, energy dependence, aging infrastructure and potential security threats to the system are fueling strong interest in and fervent debate about green energy initiatives at all levels.

From the 53 municipalities in the Commonwealth that are clean energy leaders (as signified by their Green Community designation) to Governor Patrick’s ambitious clean energy agenda to corporate America’s investment in clean energy technology to President Obama’s recent challenge to America to achieve 80 % cleanly sourced energy by 2035, clean energy initiatives are focusing on ways to save energy, money, and the planet. The transition to smart grid and renewable energy is also seen to bring immense opportunity to businesses and workers, as well as empower consumers and open up possibilities for a more sustainable lifestyle and culture.

While it’s true that transmission lines and much of the rest of our electric system can be lumped into the category of “aging infrastructure,” utilities have done a remarkable job of meeting their customers’ needs and keeping the lights on 99.9+ percent of the time in most of the country. Regulators, engineers and utility executives and employees plan for the electricity that we are going to need five, ten and 20 years from now, and make sure that power plants and infrastructure are built where we need them.

On the other hand, some of the difficulty utilities experience in siting new transmission projects may be a direct result of their good service and careful planning for the future. The need for additional electric supply and facilities to maintain reliability is rarely apparent to end use electric customers.

### **Siting New Energy Facilities is Hard**

Despite the fact that utilities must prove to regulators that new transmission lines are needed and in the best interest of the public, the challenge of siting transmission and other energy facilities goes well beyond proof of need and public interest. Siting is a complex interplay of regulatory process, public interest, engineering and most often, a race against time to meet a projected need for more electricity. Utilities proposing to build or update their transmission and distribution lines, substations and power plants are still often met with fierce

resistance from residents living nearby and other stakeholders. Similarly, renewable energy developers are finding that despite the inherent positives associated with clean technology, they are not excluded from the challenges of the siting process and often encounter passionate and deep-pocketed adversaries.

### **What Works?**

So what works and what doesn't? Aristotle, writing on rhetoric, wrote that the means of persuasion is in the character of the speaker, the emotional state of the hearer and in the argument itself. He would likely have agreed that telling stakeholders what we are going to do and hoping that they are convinced doesn't work. Putting forth a lot of information in a forum that is mostly one-way doesn't work either. After years of experience in working in the siting of electric facilities, as well as many other types of projects, we have found that what works is early, honest, structured dialogue that includes:

- Reaching out to stakeholders as soon as there is a coherent story to tell
- Listening carefully to hear and understand stakeholder concerns
- Being willing to change parts of the project to address community priorities
- Being honest about the positive and negative impacts
- Providing understandable information that audiences will relate to
- Providing information how, when and where stakeholders want it
- Repeating the steps above as often as necessary to create shared understanding and a solid relationship

Working closely with clients and stakeholders, we help clients to understand how stakeholders may perceive project impacts as a "taking." A cherished view or tree deserves a conversation and perhaps more. Concerns related to home, health and/or children are unlikely to be successfully addressed without trust and respect that enables both sides to hear and be heard. Often, a misunderstanding of what the project will be or why it is needed can be cleared up and a new appreciation of the project's value reached with the stakeholder, just by taking the time to listen.

Selecting the right people to be part of the structured dialogue is also very important. While staff engineers and other subject experts typically have the project information, their ability to use active listening styles rather than reactive styles, speak in non-technical terms (without speaking down to the audience), and respect the concerns of stakeholders are more important than the technical depth of the presentations. Stakeholders tend to come to informational meetings with their defenses already up and in place. It is all too easy to further alienate stakeholders by having the wrong personalities involved in initial meetings. Planning and preparation including anticipated questions and answers and talking points, training project staff and consultants on effective communication techniques and rehearsing are key to a successful community event.

The tactics to engage stakeholders and build productive relationships include:

- In-depth educational forums
- Open houses enabling stakeholders to learn about the project and ask questions in an informal setting
- Forums for municipal and state officials
- Computer models to enable those affected to see what the project will look like
- Outside subject experts
- Early and frequent contact with those directly impacted
- Detailed stakeholder lists, including residents; businesses; municipal and state officials; and civic, conservation, environmental and other groups
- Prompt follow-up to questions and concerns
- A relationship management system
- Ongoing mail, email texting, smart phone application notifications
- Website with up-to-date project information
- Issue-focused working groups or joint fact finding

### **Structured Dialogue Works**

Structured dialogue creates a setting where people are talking to people about both the greater good of an improved electric system and what matters to individual stakeholders. As we work to build the stronger, more energy independent and greener electric system that our nation needs, early and frequent engagement, real conversations, strong relationships among stakeholders and creative problem-solving are critical ingredients for successfully siting and building new electric transmission and sources of supply, including renewable energy projects.

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