

Minutes

Company	Moree Solar Farm
Meeting	Community Reference Group
Date	Tuesday, 11 February 2014
Time	7:10pm
Attendees	David Fitzgerald, Moree Solar Farm Steve Jackson, Moree Solar Farm Mark Connolly, Moree Plains Shire Council Leigh Smith, Homeless Services Chyrell & Ron Moore, Project neighbours Dianne Haddad-Wheaton, TAFE representative Dorothy Tighe, Indigenous community representative
Apologies	Tammy Elbourne – Moree Tourism

Welcome and introductions

- Meeting opened with an introduction provided by David Fitzgerald
 - Two main points of discussion for meeting – vote on the Terms of Reference and the impact on Tourism by the project
- Steve Jackson provided introduction and background on project & FRV
- David Fitzgerald provided introduction and background on Pacific Hydro
- David Fitzgerald provided overview of project

Question from participants:

Why was the current location chosen after the original project dimensions were reduced, where it will affect properties? Why couldn't it have been located on the other side of Barton Plains Road?

Answer: The main reason was flooding. The current site floods to a lesser degree than the area west of Barton Plains Road. The secondary reason was the size of the project better fitted on the current site.

- Discussion on project benefits.
- Overview of the renewable energy target.

Question from participants:

Is the project actually going to happen? This has been a very frustrating process.

Answer: Steve Jackson advised that his main role in his company FRV is to oversee the Moree Solar Farm Project and is confident the project will proceed; it will take approximately 2 years for the project to be constructed; ARENA (Australian Renewable Energy Authority) will support the project and indicated funding which will be committed once the project development activities are completed.; the Planning Permit has been approved; envisaged to select the preferred contractor next week.

- David Fitzgerald provided an overview of the role, objectives and membership of the Community Reference Group – which is to discuss and measure the effect of tourism that the project – both in development phase and once completed – will have.
- Steve Jackson provided advice that a Community Grants Program will be developed once the project is completed and operational.

Terms of Reference

- David Fitzgerald discussed the Terms of Reference and ensured all participants had read and understood the ToFR. All participants indicated they had read and understood the document.
- Show of hands in support to adopt the Terms of Reference. Unanimous show of support to adopt the Terms of Reference.

Tourism

Question to the group: What does tourism mean to you?

Response:

- \$40 million to the economy
- Main tourism period between March to September and slowing slightly over the summer months.
- Artesian pools the main attraction – used by (mainly) grey nomads. (Moree is an RV friendly town).
- Opals and Lightning Ridge – approximately 2-3 hour drive from Moree. Moree used as a “gateway” to the opal fields.
- Moree Tourism aiming for 300,000 tourists per year.
- Sport provides tourism:
 - Rugby Union with Weebolah Oval used and the Weebolah Bulls being very successful in the region.
 - Rugby League – Boomerangs very successful in the region.
 - Large soccer carnivals held in Moree.
- Bird watching in the wetlands.
- Agri-tourism – farm visits, pecan nuts, olives, cotton.
- Cultural tourism / galleries / art. This is still in its infancy but expected to grow.
- Bi-annual cotton trade show held in Moree.

General Discussion:

- Tourism is dependent on weather (slows during hotter months); Christmas, school holidays.
- Accommodation is utilised more during the week than the weekends due to the trade/traffic provided by tradesmen, sales reps etc.
- Accommodation operate on about 60-85% occupancy (generally).

Future developments:

- Ski park/lake – Mark Connolly advised that he thinks the Development Application was approved and the project is expected to commence/be completed within the next 2 years.
- Fish farm – Development Application for the shed was approved and the project is expected to be completed within the next 2 years.

Overview:

- David Fitzgerald explained to the group that the project developers want to know how the project will affect tourism whilst in its development phase, with workers coming into town and filling accommodation.
- Participants discussed additional options such as caravan parks / cabins in addition to hotel rooms for workers; local workers used who wouldn't use/require accommodation (advised that local employment was going to be discussed at the next meeting).

Question to the group:

What are your expectations regarding the impact on tourism that this project may have?

Response/Comments:

- Resident from a neighbouring property advised that it will have a very negative impact on them:

- Increased traffic on their road
- Increased dust because the road is unsealed
- Loss of security
- Moree Tourism is looking at ways to get visitors to stay “one more night” in town, and this project may provide an avenue.
- Opportunity for educational tourism (e.g. school excursions)
- The project may have an impact on homeless services (i.e. less accommodation available) during construction.

Participants suggested:

- Running tours to the facility rather than having public access (“controlled” tourism similar to what is employed by the farms)
- Creating a “viewing platform” – perhaps at the waste management facility (solar farms need to be viewed from a distance)
- Erecting signage at the access road to say “No through road”, or “No public access to solar farm”.
- Ensuring adequate community information regarding the project – including access to the site. (Steve Jackson provided an explanation to the Group as to what accesses and road changes have been approved as part of the planning approval.)

Response from Steve Jackson:

- Moree Solar Farm is not designed to be a tourist attraction and it is not the intention of the developers to make it a meaningful tourist attraction
- There will be infrequent times where other companies will want to visit the site
- This will not be the only Solar Farm in Australia
- There is no funding to provide an interpretative centre
- There will be no access/tourism during construction
- One of the roles of the Community Reference Group is to develop criteria to manage/measure the impact on tourism

Question to group:

How can we be judged “successful”?

Ideas put forward for consideration:

1. Minimise impact on neighbouring properties.
KPI open communication between neighbours and the Moree Solar Farm Project. Timely response by project representatives. Neighbours (or a representative) to be provided with a list of people to contact during construction.
2. No significant adverse effect on the current tourism industry.
KPI statistics. Measure how many beds are being used by “fly-in” workers and monitor whether no beds available occurs.

3. Minimise impact on community organisations, homeless services.

KPI measure how many people are turned away because of lack of available accommodation. Ensure community liaison to provide information to community groups as to timing of influx of workers.

General

- Website – positive feedback on current website.
- Facebook will not be considered.
- Attendance has dropped off a lot since meetings about the Solar Farm started.
- Response: general “fatigue” over time and no real progress; project “went quiet” for a time but attendance is expected to increase with momentum of project.
- Suggestion of an earlier start time to be more convenient for community organisations but participants generally happy to attend at 7pm, neighbours indicated prefer after work meetings.

Next Meeting

Wednesday 26th February 2014

7pm @ Council offices

Topic : Employment

MEETING CLOSED @ 9.15pm

ACTIONS

- Mark Connolly to provide a copy of the Moree Tourism Plan to David Fitzgerald
- David Fitzgerald to contact Wally McDonald
- David Fitzgerald to contact Tammy at Moree Tourism regarding what statistics are currently collated and able to be utilised to measure impact of project.
- David Fitzgerald to obtain dates of Community Links meetings (held once per month) with a view to attending and promotion community consultation.
- David Fitzgerald / Steve Jackson to provide a list of possible employment opportunities and specialised tickets/licences required to work on site/on the project.