

The Benefits of Having a Solar Farm Next Door

On Thursday March 19 I went to the first of two, public briefing sessions on the progress of the proposed solar farm for Braidwood and environs. It was a well-attended meeting. EDPR (the builders and operators of the proposed farm) were invited by BCE (Braidwood Clean Energy), the voluntary community group, to outline the key features of the proposal and answer questions from the floor. There were many questions and EDPR were open and frank in answering them. It was a productive meeting.

If I lived in town I'd be all for the development. A little more clean, renewable, environmentally friendly power would go into the grid, we'd get a more resilient network with fewer blackouts and, maybe, in the long run, even lower electricity bills. There'd be no visual blot on the landscape because the farm is to be built in a 'remote' area far away from town. And the cost to me, the end consumer? Zero. Not a brass razoo.

What's there to dislike? There's no downside. I'd have left the meeting thinking that's done. The solar farm would now be both out of sight and out of mind as far as I'm concerned.

Well, I happen to live in that remote area. The solar farm will be my next-door neighbour. Our farm will share a long fence line. The solar farm is both in my sight - and very much on my (and my neighbours') mind.

Here's why.

We worry about who is going to remediate the site once the farm reaches its use by date. Who will pay for the removal the big battery, all the structures, panels etc. and dispose of them in an environmentally friendly way? That bill will be huge, huge. Until I went to this meeting I was repeatedly told it was the landowner who held the default role. If the landowner didn't have the money the site would just sit there as a decaying wreck, useless as farmland and as dangerous as an open tip. At the meeting EDPR reassured the audience this was no longer the case, that things had changed and that they'd pick up the tab. I'd like to see that in writing.

Naturally enough my neighbours and I worry what is going to happen to our land values, the biggest asset farmers have. We know only one thing for certain. There's no way a solar farm in our backyard is going to increase the value of our land. It's just a question of how much values will fall. No serious research has been published on this subject. Promoters of these schemes say that price drops are marginal-to-mild for properties within one to two kilometres of solar farms. They have nothing to say when you ask what the size of the price fall is likely to be for properties that abut solar farms. Let's assume that the drop would be around 5%. That would mean a six figure \$ loss for small landowners and much more for those with larger holdings. No one will discuss this issue let alone suggest compensating farmers, in some way to offset such losses. Everyone from government to local community groups simply ignore or fob you off when you raise such an awkward topic.

Here's how I see the plusses and minuses,

- Government gets to see its renewables energy policy advanced - a big tick from them.
- Energy retailers get a more resilient network - a big tick from them too.
- The solar farm operators (the Australian subsidiary of a Portuguese company) supply power to the grid at wholesale prices with the intention of earning a profit. They'd expect a reasonable return on their \$16 million investment, say 10%. That would be annual profit of around \$1.6 million per annum - tick, tick.
- The landowner on which the solar farm is built will receive a modest income of around \$20,000 per annum - a little tick.
- The Braidwood district gets a more robust and more reliable network because the solar farm will be backup for the feed line from Captains Flat – tick.
- Those who advocate a fast move away from fossil fuels will like the mini grid because they'll feel they've made a contribution to the greening of Australia - tick.

All the above are winners.

- The only losers in the scheme are the landowners into which this solar farm will be plonked. We are the ones who are going to be out of pocket, the ones who will suffer a potentially sizeable economic loss and (amongst other things) an increased risk of fire due to solar farm malfunctions (the proposed solar farm is in a high fire danger area) - big cross.

Where is the equity in that? Is this justice? Aren't we members of the Braidwood Community too? Is it moral to simply ignore us because we are small in numbers and therefore dismissible from a political point of view? Don't we have the same rights as everybody else?

We are not seeking to make a profit here, our goal is simply to avoid bearing a significant loss. All we're asking for is a fair go.

There are many equitable ways of compensating farmers and landowners that wouldn't damage the financial viability of the project, a project I (for one) would like to see happen. All we've been offered in the DA is a three-metre-high shrubbery screen along our shared fence line ! Whoopee.

Before leaving the briefing, I was talking over some of the above points with one of the organisers. Their response was "well, it has to be built alongside someone". I should have been quick enough to reply "that's true, how would you feel if that someone was you ?" I wasn't. Pity.

Tim Lenehan