

Shires seek renewable benefits

By **KIERA BRIDCUTT**



AS renewable energy projects surge into regional Western Australia, local governments want community benefits mandated and locally managed, warning they are not to be sidelined in decisions affecting their regions.

Nine local governments from the Mid West and the Wheatbelt have issued a statement that local communities must be “at the table” when it comes to renewable energy projects such as wind, solar and battery storage.

The statement follows a submission made to the State government last year, which was supported by 40 regional local governments facing the prospect of renewable energy projects in their region.

The submission called for clarity and certainty in the PoweringWA’s Draft Guideline on Community Benefits for Renewable Energy Projects.

□ Narrogin at the heart of the energy transition

For the Shire of Narrogin, there are currently three major renewable energy projects that have already received development approval.

These include the Narrogin Wind Farm, Narrogin Solar Farm and Battery Energy Storage System, and Narrogin Battery Energy Storage System, which are in the emerging Narrogin Renewable Energy Zone (NREZ).

There are various other renewable energy projects being proposed in the area.

“Within approximately a 45-minute radius of the Narrogin townsite, there are multiple additional wind, solar, battery storage and renewable fuel projects at various stages of development or pre-lodgement,” said Shire of Narrogin president Leigh Ballard.

“Collectively, these represent more than \$18 billion in potential investment across the wider region, alongside significant new transmission infrastructure.

“This scale of development underscores that Narrogin and surrounding shires are not marginal participants in the energy transition – we are hosting it.”

When it comes to community benefit agreements with these projects, Mr Ballard said some of the approved projects include these commitments.



□ Local governments in Western Australia are calling on the State government to mandate community benefit contributions. Photo by AgriShots.

“However, these arrangements are currently voluntary, inconsistent and unsecured,” he said.

“Outcomes depend heavily on individual negotiations rather than a clear Statewide framework.

“That creates uncertainty for communities, councils and proponents, and exposes local governments to unnecessary political and reputation risk.”

Mr Ballard believes current guidelines do not go far enough to protect local community interests.

“While the draft guideline is a step in the right direction, it does not yet provide mandatory contributions, long-term security or guaranteed local administration,” he said.

“Without these elements, there remains a real risk that decisions affecting regional communities are effectively determined by Perth-centric agencies rather than by those hosting the infrastructure.”

By enforcing mandatory contributions, Mr Ballard said it would provide certainty, consistency and

fairness, whereas a voluntary system creates a “postcode lottery” and “pits councils against each other” when it comes to negotiations with well-resourced proponents.

“A clear, mandatory framework protects communities, gives industry certainty, and removes the perception that outcomes depend on negotiation leverage rather than policy,” Mr Ballard said.

“Community benefit funds should be administered locally – by councils or community-based structures – with transparent governance, audited financial systems and clear accountability.

“Local governments already manage restricted reserves and long-term community investment and are best placed to ensure funds align with local priorities.”

When it comes to community support, Mr Ballard said they broadly supported renewable energy and understood its importance to WA’s future,

However, that support is deter-

mined by whether the projects are developed with genuine local engagement, transparency and fair benefit sharing.

“Where people feel decisions are being made remotely or benefits are unclear or unenforceable, confidence and social licence are weakened,” Mr Ballard said.

Being “at the table” would involve local governments’ early involvement in renewable energy discussions and shaping outcomes rather than being consulted after decisions are already locked in.

“Practically, this includes early engagement, clear minimum standards for community benefits, local input into priorities, and local administration of benefit funds,” Mr Ballard said.

The shires are calling for a final guideline that mandates contributions, secures them for the life of projects, allocates benefits based on where infrastructure is located and is delivered locally by the community of local government.

“Getting this right will strengthen social licence and help deliver the energy transition faster and more fairly,” Mr Ballard said.

Shires like Narrogin are hosting a significant number of the infrastructure required for the State’s clean energy future.

“This is not opposition to renewables – it is a call for partnership,” Mr Ballard said.

“Decisions about regional places should not be made remotely, without those communities having a real say in outcomes that will shape their landscapes and economies for decades.”

“It’s really important that we do get clarity”

While the Shire of Mingenev is yet to have any wind farms, other green energy developments are being proposed.

“Our shire is very supportive of green energy and that transition,” said Mingenev shire president Hellene McTaggart.

“We have one of the largest inland gas reserves that is being developed in our shire and that is a key part of the green energy transition.

“Our core position really is that these are very large industrial-scale developments with long-term impacts on everything in our local landscape including roads and services, and the people who are living in and around these developments, and they’ll be here for a very long time.”

Ms McTaggart said their main concern is establishing community benefits for the communities that were impacted and gaining clarity on the guidelines.

“We are the closest to those impacts and we’re very accountable to the people that live and work in this community,” she said.

“We understand not only the impacts of these potential projects, but also the needs and opportunities that we have.

“We would like to see funds back to our community for legacy projects through community benefit funds and we firmly believe that that should be the local government or the local community should be administering those funds and deciding where they are best attributed to.

“We’re really keen to work with government to have a seat at the table and make sure that community benefits funds are going to come and be administered and in the best way, which we believe is through our local communities.”

She said that at this stage, pro-

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ponents have dealt primarily with landholders.

“Our residents, I would say, are very aware that this is happening and have made it very clear to us as a shire council that they expect these big changes,” Ms McTaggart said.

“They want to see benefit out of them, they want to make sure that we are not worse off under this arrangement, which we will be if we don’t have community benefit funds being decided by the people that are actually impacted by them, which is our local communities.”

The shires have been looking at other States to identify effective community benefit models.

“There are other States that currently have these community benefit funds, arrangements legislated, and we’ve looked at those because they’re clearly working in places like New South Wales,” Ms McTaggart said.

“It’s working in those States so we don’t see a real need to recreate the wheel here.

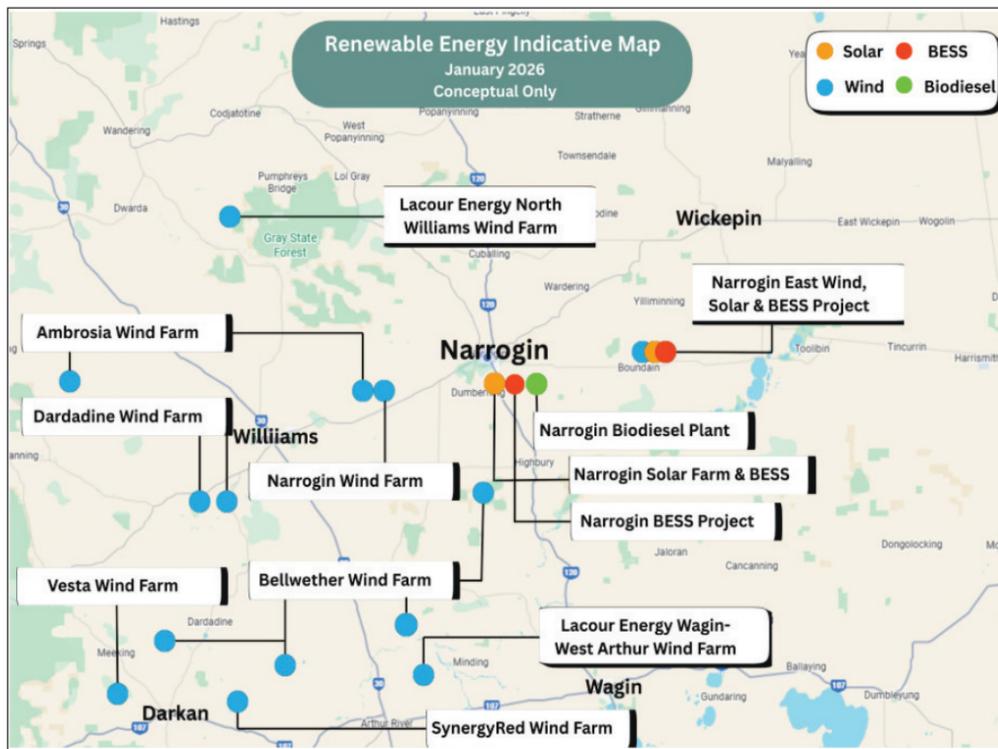
“WA is an outlier in this respect at the moment.

“Proponents support the model that is adopted in other States and the model that certainly we have reflected in our community benefits policy.”

The Shire of Mingenew currently has its own community benefits policy, which was adopted back in July 2024.

“We were one of the first Western Australian local governments to do that, so we have a really clear policy that sets out how we are going to administer that fund, but also it’s very much community driven,” Ms McTaggart said.

“It’s driven by a local community reference group.



“They will provide recommendations to council and are considered by council.

“We’ve based our policy on what is the standard and on other States which have adopted legislation.”

However, this is local government policy rather than State government legislation.

“The only way in which we can confirm those funds or those benefits back to the community and be administered locally is through legislation,” Ms McTaggart said.

“In terms of our local government policy, it’s completely voluntary.”

Ensuring the future of rural communities

Shire of West Arthur president

Karen Harrington said community benefit funds have the potential to allow strategic projects to be undertaken in the shire that otherwise would not be possible.

“The use of the fund could ensure future viability of small rural communities such as ours,” Ms Harrington said.

“It’s through investment in housing, water security, medical services, and also other economic development areas.

“It needs to be a partnership between all three parties otherwise it does make it difficult in the long-term.”

She said there were large scale transmission line projects announced

within the shire, as well as wind farm proposals being put forward.

Ms Harrington said the shire and council had been proactive with engaging with the community to ensure they deliver a balanced approach to delivering information about the renewable energy transition.

“Back in 2024 the Shire of West Arthur released its key principles for effective energy development in the shire,” Ms Harrington said.

“The basic points are that council does support the development of renewable energy within the shire.

“Renewable energy projects should complement the existing agricultural industry within the shire, and it is also

□ A conceptual map and project list of renewable energy projects proposed within a 45-minute drive of Narrogin as of January 2026, produced by the Shire of Narrogin.

essential that energy transition delivers economic opportunities, ensures reliable and affordable electricity, develops legacy infrastructure and maximises benefits for our community.”

With the draft guidelines yet to be released, Ms Harrington said it created uncertainty as developers were still talking with them and want to move forward.

“As far as I know, they’re quite open to discussions about community benefit funds,” she said.

“So I also think a mandated benefit fund would probably benefit the developers as well as the local government.”

Ms Harrington said the Towards Net Zero: Building a Legacy report produced by the Regional Australia Institute really “hits the nail on the head”.

“Our small communities don’t just want to sit and watch this all happen, they want to be part of the process,” she said.

“They don’t want it to happen to them, they want it (and) we want it to happen with us.”

Minister’s response

The WA Minister for Energy and Decarbonisation, Amber-Jade Sanderson, said work was progressing to finalise the guidelines.

“They will be released soon,” Ms Sanderson said.

“Regional communities located where there are strong renewable resources will play a pivotal role in our energy transition, and it is important that they realise lasting benefits as WA becomes a renewable energy powerhouse.

“Industry and communities have sought guidelines that will make consultation simpler for everyone – and ensure that communities are central to discussions.”

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