

November 11, 2023

Committee Members,

I apologize that I am unable to be with you today. This afternoon I'm in Detroit, speaking on a panel at the Midwestern Governors Association-Organization of MISO States Transmission Summit. I was specifically asked to speak on "transmission siting and community engagement", "reflecting on effective, meaningful community engagement in support of infrastructure siting."

But I should back up. My name is Sarah Mills and I am the Director of the Center for EmPowering Communities at the University of Michigan. Our center conducts applied research and engagement with communities across the state in helping them meet their community goals as the state undergoes an energy transition. We have programming for both the state's "Catalyst Leadership" communities, who have achieved gold or silver status on the Michigan Green Communities Challenge, many of which have their own clean energy goals, as well as rural areas which will host the majority of wind and solar projects that our state needs in order to meet its energy goals.

It's important for you to know, though, that my PhD focused on farmland preservation. I grew up at the end of a dirt road in Monroe County and I only ended up studying energy inadvertently—I was looking to see whether wind energy could be a farmland preservation tool. It is: wind turbines are allowing farmers to diversify their revenue streams and they are pumping that money back into the local economy. But I also know that wind turbines are not universally loved, particularly by non-farming neighbors, and that solar plays out differently in its relationship to farmland preservation.

It's also important for you to know that I'm an odd academic. I spend more of my time standing in rural communities before planning commissions and township boards than I do writing papers. But this has given me a firsthand view of the concerns that community members have about renewables, the opportunities that they see, and how that's different from community to community. When I started visiting these rural communities, it was just to help them understand the pros and cons of renewables: what's true and what's false. When I say renewables have both pros and cons at the local level, that means I manage to make everyone—both supporters and opposers of renewables—mad at me. I do it because I think it's important that communities understand the true impacts that a project might have on them and their community.

With support from the State Energy Office in EGLE and in collaboration with my colleagues at MSU Extension, we now have developed fill-in-the-blank solar zoning templates, we are piloting new community engagement techniques, and we conduct deep dive information sessions where we can talk local officials through the pros and cons of different zoning regulations. I help talk them through their community goals—whether for farmland preservation, or economic development, or growth of tourism or residential development—and help them understand how wind or solar fit within the context of their

Comprehensive Plan, and then how to translate that into zoning. I'm a huge proponent of consistency: encouraging them not just to set special rules for renewables because they are the "new thing" but to think through how the impacts of renewables—both positive and negative—compare to other land uses, be-it golf courses or junk yards or subdivision developments or other power plants. And rather than punt a decision on where wind and solar fit, I'm adamant that these communities do the job of planning, to figure out where in their community it makes the most sense. Admittedly, not all have had that conversation, but I myself have stood in dozens of township halls late on Thursday nights helping communities think this through, because the decisions they make about renewable energy—particularly the biggest projects—will impact their communities and farm families within them for generations.

Our UM center has also developed the Renewable Energy Academy, which takes local officials, planning commissioners, and township planners and attorneys on bus tours of wind and solar farms so that they can listen for themselves to wind turbines and walk amidst the panels of a solar farm. I do this because I know that people need first-hand experience of what wind or solar might mean for their community, and they walk away a whole lot better informed and very often, much less scared.

But I wouldn't say that all communities will "learn to live" with wind or solar farms once they are built. This is where I have an actual research paper, with Dr. Doug Bessette at MSU, where we found that while some folks are "learning to live" with turbines, others aren't. And the people who aren't are the people who felt that the process that led to the project being built was unfair. The importance of process fairness surfaces not only in our work here in Michigan, but as a theme throughout the social science research on renewable energy. And there is specifically research on state-level siting processes in the Midwest and in Canada that identifies procedural justice shortcomings when decisions are being made in the state capital.

That is not to say, though, that my research suggests there is no role for the state. Indeed, it is the role of the state government to set policies that balance state and local interests and priorities. Nor should you take my comments to mean that I think the current siting rules will allow us to achieve the targets that climate science—and the Clean Energy Future package—lay out. I and my students created the nation's first renewable energy zoning database right here in Michigan—where we've pulled together all 1,350+ of the zoning ordinances from across the state and read how they treat wind and solar. We have hundreds of townships, cities, and villages that have restrictive ordinances in place—some inadvertently (and I have a factsheet on this) but some purposefully. These restrictions are possible because it's not clear from the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (MZEA) or any other law whether they must allow all renewables or can pick between wind or solar; or whether they must allow projects of unlimited size or if they can confine them to a tiny area. This needs to be sorted out if we are to achieve our clean energy goals.

I want to acknowledge that the proposed approach being considered now in Michigan—to focus siting reform on the biggest projects—is not counter to the norm. Indeed, it was my students who pulled together the first nationwide database of how all 50 states regulate solar and wind, finding that where authority for renewables is shared, it most commonly gives the state more control over the largest projects. But I also want to underscore that research demonstrates that it is precisely these largest projects that have the biggest local impacts (both positive and negative). And at the same time, my research and that of others finds that smaller projects and those sited on previously disturbed lands or brownfields often have significantly more social acceptance than larger ones sited on greenfields. Already, in our current siting regime, these smaller, brownfield projects are at an economic disadvantage when put up against large greenfield solar, with the only tempering factor being rural local government opposition to host a mega project. Moreover, state-level processes with no upper limit on the scale of a project run the risk of some communities being asked to shoulder an undue share of this infrastructure, and continuing to leave communities who desire the economic benefits of renewables to revitalize previously disturbed lands at a disadvantage.

In closing, I would like to note that we aren't the only state struggling with this right now. States across the country are facing this same challenge. And for whatever odd reason, my ability to see the issue from a rural perspective means that I often find myself called upon to help think through ways that we can change policy, or planning, or development practices to accelerate the speed of renewables deployment in a way that uplifts host communities. I know folks who don't like renewables bristle when I say this, but I do think renewable energy is perhaps the greatest economic development opportunity that rural communities have seen in decades. We are seeing this in many of the Michigan communities that host renewables. But remember that these existing projects were designed to fit within the context of each rural community's land use and economic development plans. I fear that this may not be the norm going forward.

The solutions that have been tried everywhere else aren't working—and I, and UM's Center for EmPowering Communities are working to generate solutions that can balance both state and local interests, generate the knowledge of what impacts renewable projects have at the local level, and provide communities with more tools to evaluate projects. I'm excited that the legislature recognizes the importance that siting policy plays to achieving our clean energy goals and am happy to share any information I have gleaned that might be helpful to policymaking.

Sincerely,



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