

Woomelang and District Development Association

Meeting Minutes

Date: Tuesday May 22nd 2018

Place: Woomelang Multi-purpose Centre

Time: 18:00

Present

Trish Fraser	Lisa Molina	Les Knights
Mark Burt	Wendy Reiss	Graham Shore
Gwenyth Barbary Brydie Kelly	Monica Outen	Kaye Collins

Apologies

Manfred Feeger	Joe Collins	Sharon Gallagher
Rick Johnson	Darrell Boxall	Mark Keenan
Jason Collins		

General Business:

1. Edwin Irvine from Natimuk Community Energy visited us after Trish's invitation to the NCE to have someone come and talk to us. This follows on from the release of grant funding by the Victorian Government called the New Energy Jobs fund.

Edwin is a Vice President of NCE. He is not a tech person – please don't ask those questions of him, but if we email him tech questions he can chase information for us.

He can talk about the use and development of land for community energy, since land development is his profession.

He notes that the mix of skills that we bring to the table will be important in bringing a project to success.

The process in Natimuk began in 2007: Horsham Rural City ran a Community Building Project, asking people to put in ideas for what they wanted to build in their community.

There were two things on Natimuk's list: zero emissions and renewable energy. So a bunch of Natimuk people started to do some things towards these two goals.

Edwin's partner organised a bulk purchase of panels for rooftop systems, so that all the people who participated and had their rooftop systems installed shared the lower price. A second bulk purchase was done a little later. Natimuk now has around 30% of town having solar. There are panels on the Post Office, the shearing shed at the showgrounds & other public buildings.

Natimuk's population is around 450, with the district being around 700.

Les asked about limits to the amount of power being fed into the grid - would this affect them? Edwin noted that so far they haven't had issues with power companies – in their studies pre-solar farm, they think the power companies have no issue with up to 5Mw system (around 5000 panels).

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In 2015 the group formed Natimuk Community Energy as an incorporated association, since that was necessary to apply for grants, and to take out Public Liability Insurance which was required by the Powershop grant.

They invited Tim Flannery to come up to Natimuk, and they held a town meeting to discuss renewable energy.

The Powershop grant was a Powershop Community Energy grant; they grant funds for solar systems for community groups. Powershop provided \$10K, and they put out tenders for installation of a solar system at the showgrounds. The showgrounds is paying the \$10K back at something like \$50 per month, and when the whole is paid back, they will provide a solar system on another community building, with a pay-back scheme as with the showgrounds, so that the funds will end up providing several systems.

Another idea is to make a bulk purchase of insulation, so that there will be energy conservation as well as renewable production.

Solar farm

NCE was successful in obtaining a grant for \$84K from the Victorian government's Renewable Energy Jobs Fund. There were three possible projects that they could have started with this grant:

- A solar farm
- A virtual network linking all solar installations, so the solar input is shared
- a behind-the-meter project, such as putting a solar system on the hospital (their largest energy user), selling the power back to that user for a kWh price lower than market but higher than the back-to-grid price

Since the behind-the-meter is something they could perhaps achieve without the grant, they thought that the best use for it was for the most difficult case: the solar farm.

The grant covers the first stages of the feasibility study. They needed to use part of the grant to hire a person to do the work, since there is a lot of work to be done.

To keep the hiring and management processes at arms-length and avoid questions of nepotism, NCE asked the Rural City of Horsham to establish a committee, with one NCE representative who reports back to the NCE. The committee advertised and screened applicants and appointed the person who does the work.

The worker appointed consultants to do the work. These consultants turned out to be less than useful and very expensive, so they were fired (it was a difficult process), and the consultancy requirement was re-advertised. Consultancy appointed was Ekistica from Alice Springs, who were able to do the job required within budget.

Edwin provided us with print copies of their summary report; this report is available from <http://www.natimukcommunityenergy.org/projects#current> (Trish will also upload the pdf to the Shared Documents folder on the website, <http://woomelang.com/wdda-std/>.)

The summary report is important to us, because it details exactly where the business case pitfalls are, so we can see that without a working business case plan, any similar project will fail.

Having reached this milestone, the next technical step involves applying to Powercor for testing scenarios to be modelled, to make sure of the technical feasibility of the plan. This will require a) planning permission and b) hiring engineers (cost between \$80k and \$100K) to do the actual testing.

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It will be necessary also to set a corporate structure in place to administer and manage and maintain the solar farm - including creating a board, making sure the corporate structure reflects the values and wishes of NCE.

Edwin noted that it is difficult to be both a generator and a distributor of power - these are very different functions.

NCE financial model: they will allow (encourage) locals to invest in construction (looking for 51% community ownership); they will then pay dividends from the sale of power to investors. If the solar farm remains grid-connected, they will have no real other way for locals to benefit with cheap power. They are looking to have power purchasing agreements with corporations like GWM Water and others, and they have hopes of arranging a partnership with an organisation that will act something like a retailer (Edwin is under a non-disclosure agreement, so could not give details).

Jobs ongoing once the solar farm is built and operating: administration, maintenance, monitoring, training etc. All local jobs into the future.

Edwin advised us to pay very close attention to the flowchart in the Ekistica summary, where the pitfalls are detailed.

He said that the things he learned during the process:

- the work, and the amount of work, is HARD.
- A lot of capital is needed to get started. (If we can get the initial \$250K or so, the large grant is comparatively easier.)
- It takes time, and a lot of it from the people involved.
- The workload becomes a full-time job; make sure there's a third party managing transparency.

Edwin will send more information by email, and welcomes us keeping in contact.

Monica moved that we carry these matters over to the next meeting, and consider forming a subcommittee. Seconded Trish, carried.

Cronomby Tanks: Les has mowed, and says it's again possible to walk around the Tanks. However, we need to install more bollards and gates to protect the tracks. Mon advised that there are still bollards in the shed. The working bee for the tanks is set for June 17th, Trish will alert people by SMS a day or so before and again on the day.

Pigeons: some discussion about pigeon control. Lisa mentioned that bird spikes work well for her to prevent pigeons nesting, Brydie notes that they seem to be nesting down at the silos. Trish offered to write to Graincorp and complain. Carried over without resolution.

Trish will be attending the May 30th Wimmera/Southern Mallee Regional Partnership meeting in Stawell and will report back.

Meeting Closed at: 20.00

Next Meeting: 26th June, MPC, 18:00.