

GR June 10, 20

NO GO ON D.A. FEE

Council quashes Community Energy's waiver bid

By LOUISE THROWER

A COMMUNITY group has questioned the council's support for renewable energy projects following its decision not to waive a development application fee for a solar farm.

At Tuesday night's council meeting, Community Energy for Goulburn (CE4G) formally requested the estimated \$5500 lodgement fee be waived or deferred.

The not-for-profit group hopes to build a \$2.7 million 1.2MW solar farm comprising

4000 panels at Bridge St, North Goulburn, off Sydney Rd. If realised, it would be the country's first community owned renewable energy project.

Former Liberal leader John Hewson officially launched the project in Goulburn last Saturday.

CE4G is the project driver until a legal entity is established to take it forward, following approval. The solar farm would be 51 per cent community owned and have a 49pc commercial stake.

Convenor Peter Fraser said CE4G did not

have any money, hence the council request.

But councillors rejected it unanimously, without discussion, partly on the basis it was a "commercial venture".

"I was very disappointed that the council could not find a way to support this community group," Mr Fraser said after the meeting.

"I was particularly surprised that there was no discussion on the issue, and not even any questions asked after I had explained our request in detail.

"The general manager claims that the rejection of our proposal is not to be taken as a lack of support for the project. So where is the support from council?"

Mr Fraser said only two councillors turned up to Saturday's launch, which attracted more than 150 people. He was surprised councillors didn't offer any other funding solutions and questioned what practical support the council was prepared to offer "other than a few supportive words?"

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"This project is attracting attention from all over Australia, has the active support of the local member, is being showcased on the NSW Department of Environment website, yet our council cannot find a practical way of supporting this community project. We are very disappointed."

General manager Warwick Bennett recommended the request be declined. Although the application had "proposed strong community involvement, it was still a commercial venture and the facility, once developed would sell electricity for a profit", he stated in his report.

"There is an energy market with multiple players that participate in similar ventures," he wrote. "Council would need to be convinced that the community interest (from a transparency and equity perspective) that this development is different before determining to waive the DA assessment fees."

"Council needs to be convinced it is not setting a precedent."

In a letter to the council, CE4G estimated 51pc community ownership and a maximum 30pc debt.

Mr Bennett said the council must be concerned that such a significant project, of "high cost, had no equity from day one". While people had pledged to invest at an information day on the solar farm, he expected they would want to see approvals first.

"I don't consider it's council's role to sponsor a commercial venture, albeit with proposed significant community input," he wrote.

Mr Bennett noted that CE4G had also offered the cost of waiving the fee as council's equity in the solar farm, but he believed this would create a conflict of interest in the community's mind.

He also discounted the group's suggestion to defer the fee, saying the council's policy dictated that a DA could not be received until full fees were paid.

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