

Questions are raised over consultation during wind farm public hearing

BY CAROLYN FARRAR

A director and shareholder of Straboy Wind Energy Ltd., who was also involved in compiling the Environmental Impact Statement for the Straboy wind farm project, said he saw no conflict in the dual roles.

In an earlier submission to the An Bord Pleanála oral hearing on the project, John Ward, a principal of Murray & Associates and a director and shareholder of Straboy Wind Energy, said that he was responsible for compilation of the EIS and had drafted the landscape and visual assessment, and a number of other sections.

Under cross-questioning last week at the An Bord Pleanála oral hearing on the wind farm project, Mr. Ward said that five qualified landscape architects and two who assisted in drafting were also involved, adding "so I don't act alone".

"Were you not concerned there would be a perceived conflict among your many roles?" asked John Evans, representing objectors, the Glenties Wind Farm Information Group.

"No", Mr. Ward replied.

Mr. Evans said that the information group had made submissions to the hearing involving "many inadequacies in the EIS and also in data and information brought before the hearing and discussed at length. Would it not have been better for Straboy to employ an independent practice to do the EIS?"

"No", Mr. Ward said.

The hearing ran over six days at the Highland Hotel in Glenties.

It was called after 15 appeals were lodged against Donegal County Council's January 2012 decision to grant planning permission for 22 of the 25 turbines in the Straboy Wind Energy Ltd. application.

The wind farm is planned for lands in the hills about 1.5 kilometres north east of Glenties.

In cross-questioning Mr. Ward on Oct. 25th, the last day of the hearing, Mr. Evans asked why Mr. Ward, who said he had considerable experience with operational projects, had not engaged in public consultation on the Straboy wind farm project.

Mr. Ward responded that there had been one-to-one consultations.

"My own recollection is I personally had a number of meetings with individuals in the Highlands Hotel here, some landowners and extended family of landowners," he said.

"It happened on a number of occasions."

He also said Conal Shovlin, a director of Straboy Wind Energy, also had one-to-one consultations with a number of people over a period of time.

"People in rural areas don't want to discuss their business in public forums," Mr. Ward said.

Mr. Evans said he could understand why landowners who were making financial decisions would want to discuss them in private.

When he asked again why there had been no larger public consultation, Mr. Ward said, "I would have dealt with them as well".

Mr. Shovlin also told the hearing that he had discussed the matter widely with people.

Not seem feasible that he would fail to engage in what I think the generality of people would see to be a public consultation," he said.

In another area of cross-questioning, Mr. Evans asked why a baseline noise survey had not been carried out for the EIS.

In the first week of the hearing, the oral hearing heard that the baseline noise-level study into the wind farm development was carried out less than a week before the oral hearing began, and not before planning permission was granted in January.

Mr. Ward said that because a predictive model created for the site and surrounding area did not identify any significant impact to houses, and because no houses were within 500 meters of the proposed development, "the view was taken that it wouldn't have been required at that time."

Kevin Moore, senior planning inspector with An Bord Pleanála, asked why the baseline survey was later undertaken.

Mr. Ward said the survey had been prepared in response to concerns expressed by appellants and observers, in the same way that shadow flicker assessments were "further iterated for the hearing due to representations made at the time".

However, neither Mr. Ward nor Mr. Shovlin provided the hearing with the numbers of people with whom they had consulted, when Mr. Evans asked how many people had been involved in the consultations.

Also in the cross-questioning, Mr. Evans referred to submissions made at the hearing from members of the public who raised concerns about health issues, loss of property value, sleep disruptions, the visual impact of turbines, peat slippage and the impact on tourism and culture resulting from the wind farm.

"Mr. Ward, do you care about any of these issues?" Mr. Evans asked.

Mr. Ward said he would be mindful of them, but said that in his experience of operational projects, which he described as considerable, "these problems have never manifested themselves".

Speaking later during the questioning, Mr. Evans continued, "The point of my preamble, given all of that knowledge, is it not entirely rational to proceed on the basis that, from your point of view, these are likely to be obstacles in people's minds, and there is an obligation, perhaps even out of pure self-interest, to address these as early as possible?"

Gavin Lawlor, representing Straboy Wind Energy, said, "You're asking for the names of people met over a three, four-year period, and I'm not sure it's of benefit."

He said "rightly or wrongly", that the company had made the decision that was the best forum for public consultation.

However, Mr. Evans said that Mr. Ward "was aware of these differences, these ideas, these concerns that were likely to be in people's minds, and it simply does

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Objectors feel 'fully heard' at oral hearing

The Glenties Windfarm Information Group chairperson this week said appellants and observers to the appeal against the proposed Straboy wind farm could take heart that their concerns were fully heard at the An Bord Pleanála oral hearing held in Glenties over the last two weeks.

Chairman of the group, Ernan O'Donnell, said that until now, the information group and other objectors to the Straboy Wind Energy Ltd. planning application for the wind farm had felt they were whistling in the dark.

"At long last our concerns over health, noise and hydrogeology have been publicly acknowledged," said Mr O'Donnell. He said submissions offered by specialists the information group brought before the hearing were underlined by what he described as "poignant and emotive readings to the hearing" from several young local mothers.

"It is an utter tragedy that any young family should contemplate leaving their home area as a result of the imposition of such a project," Mr. O'Donnell said.

The information group was also critical of Donegal County Council planners, who granted planning permission to the project earlier this year. And information group members and experts who made submissions to the oral hearing on behalf of the group also found fault with the methodology used to prepare the Environmental Impact Statement, and the conclusions the EIS drew.

They also raised questions at the hearing of John Ward, a shareholder in Straboy Wind Energy, who was also a principal in the company that compiled the initial EIS. Mr. Ward said he did not believe there was a conflict of interest, and said others worked on the EIS as well.

One of the appellants to the wind farm project, Joseph Brennan, of an adjacent protected red grouse sanctuary at Shallogans, called for the independent production of EISs on a RTE Radió na Gaeltachta interview after the hearing.

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