

'THE ELECTRIC SANDWICH'

Would you fancy living between a line of 440kv pylons and a skyline dominated by wind turbines that stand 400 feet tall at their highest blade tip? Before I return to that question, digest the following.

Quote 1: "Personally, you wouldn't want a turbine beside your house, of course not. Who would say that they would?"

Quote 2: "I wouldn't like to live close to a pylon, but who would?"

The first comment was made by new Environment Minister Alan Kelly when interviewed on WLRfm on September 15th; the second infamously uttered by EirGrid Chairman designate (and former An Bord Pleanála Chair) John O'Connor in Leinster House last December.

Now, back to my initial premise: when one puts such a question to someone living in a city or large town and then put the same question to a rural dweller, the chances are that their replies will be, pardon the pun, poles apart.

Over the past two-plus years, whenever I've floated such a question, primarily on my Facebook page, the general reply has broken down along the following lines (again, excuse the pun).

City resident: "What's the problem? We need electricity. There's been poles across the country since the 1930s; if you don't have them then you'd have no power for homes out in the countryside. We're in the 21st Century now, demands have changed and we need to look to the future. As for wind turbines, I think they're beautiful to look at. So again, what's the problem?"

Rural dweller: "My family have lived here for generations. We love it here. The land is as much a part of us as the blood in our veins. We're talking about our identity here. Now we're faced with having ghastly pylons dotted every 75 metres across the fields next to us, as well as seeing foreign energy companies come in here, wishing to build massive wind turbines on our hillsides and ruin our unspoilt countryside for decades."

Wind energy development and the GridLink project are, beyond dispute, the two issues of greatest concern to Rural Ireland currently.

Wind turbines have generated considerable column inches in recent months in West Waterford, just outside Portlaoighaire and in the Faugheen/Ahenny townlands outside Carrick-on-Suir.

As a native of Sallyhene, Portlaoighaire, literally the width of a field and a narrow strip of woodland away from the two wind turbines at Beallough, and as a Faugheen resident these past 18 months, I've written and heard a great deal about the issue.

And upon driving into Dungarvan these past few months, the two turbines that now dominate the Helvick/An Rinn skyline, as well as the three (but soon to be eight) turbines on the Drum Hills at Kereen have made for unavoidable viewing.

Last week, An Bord Pleanála refused planning permission for the construction of a further 12 wind turbines on lands adjacent to the Drum Hills site at Mount Stuart/Ballyguiry Upper, much to the relief of local residents.

"Ecopower (the Belgian company which applied to build the proposed wind park) we have made ourselves clear, we DON'T want you or any of your cronies," read a post on the Dungarvan Against Wind Turbines Facebook page on Tuesday last. "Now do the right thing and let this be an END of it."

A similar outcome is just what the majority of residents in Faugheen and Ahenny are seeking when it comes to DunoAir's proposal to construct eight wind turbines on Carrigadoon and Curragh Dobbin hills.

And the same applies for those living in the Beallough/Sallyhene townlands outside Portlaoighaire, where Tornado Electrical Ltd wishes to construct a third wind turbine.

I lived within proximity of those turbines for nine months a couple of years ago, so I've got a first hand reference point that a great many people on either side of this debate don't actually have.

In general, I have to admit I'd no real issue with those turbines being constructed, but I must add, on a personal basis, that I wouldn't be keen on seeing a third added in the area.

It's also worth stating that on those occasions when the prevailing wind has not proven so prevalent and 'blew back' over where I was living, the turbines did make noticeable noise.

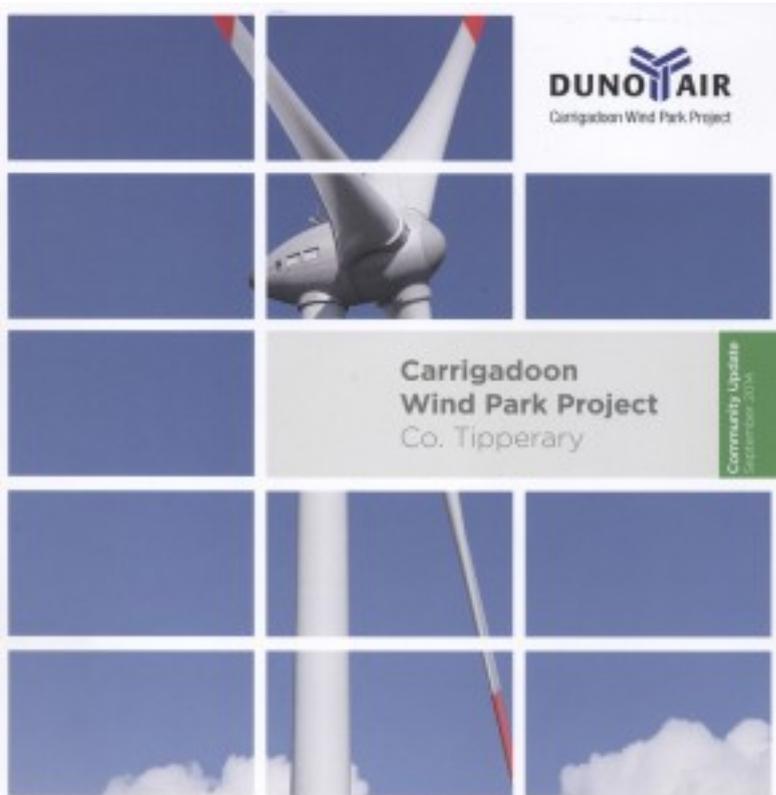
On the sixth page of DunoAir's Community Update booklet regarding their Carrigadoon Wind Park proposal, the top half of the page featured a graphic titled: 'How Loud Is A Wind Turbine?'

If one is living, say, 400 metres (a quarter mile) from one wind turbine, its decibel level, according to DunoAir, is the equivalent of the noise made by a standard fridge.

DunoAir adds: "The state-of-the-art 3 blade machines proposed for the project are direct drive machines. They have no high-speed mechanical components and therefore do not produce mechanical noise...According to the Wind Energy Development Guidelines, noise is unlikely to be a significant problem where the distance from the nearest turbine to any noise sensitive property is more than 500 metres...and will not adversely impact upon surrounding properties."

Residents are concerned about the prospect of living in an 'electric sandwich', as one local, Pete Smith, put it to me a few weeks ago, i.e. wind turbines on one side and pylons on the other.

To describe such opponents as 'NIMBY' cranks is unjust, in my view. After all, if the top men in the Department of the Environment and EirGrid wouldn't fancy living near pylons or turbines, doesn't that merely underline that residents are thoroughly justified in making their voices heard on this pressing issue?



The Community Update booklet which DunoAir made available to the public at its September 19th Open Day at the Carraig Hotel in Carrick-on-Suir.