



New South Wales Government
Independent Planning Commission

TRANSCRIPT OF MEETING

RE: MUSWELLBROOK SOLAR FARM (SSD-46543209)

COUNCIL

PANEL: NEAL MENZIES (CHAIR)
SUELLEN FITZGERALD
MICHAEL WRIGHT

OFFICE OF THE IPC: KENDALL CLYDSDALE
GEOFF KWOK

**MUSWELLBROOK
SHIRE COUNCIL:** JEFF DRAYTON
DEREK FINNIGAN
SHARON POPE
THERESA FOLPP
LEAH WARD

LOCATION: ZOOM VIDEO-CONFERENCE

DATE: 1:30PM
FRIDAY, 17th JANUARY 2025

<THE MEETING COMMENCED

5 **MS SHARON POPE:** Hi everyone, just checking you can hear us okay?

MR NEAL MENZIES: We can hear you, yes.

10 **MS POPE:** Wonderful. [Pause] We're just waiting on the General Manager and Mayor at the moment. I'm Sharon Pope. This is Theresa Folpp. Unfortunately, Imelda won't be joining us. Our engineering staff have various bits of leave approved last year and we just won't have one of them in the room.

15 **MR MENZIES:** Okay.

MS POPE: But I think Transport for New South Wales have addressed most of the issues with the intersection with the highway. So, I should be able to handle most of the other things related to roads.

20 **MR MENZIES:** Okay. Let's kick this meeting off then. I'm Neal Menzies, I'm the Chair. I have a formal statement that I've got to read at the outset, and once I've read that we move to a much more informal mode. So, I'll go through our formal statement before getting to a discussion with you.

25 So, before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge that I'm speaking to you from the land of the Yugambah and Kombumerri peoples on the Gold Coast hinterland. And I acknowledge the traditional owners of all of the countries from which we're meeting virtually today, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

30 Welcome to the meeting today to discuss the Muswellbrook Solar Farm Project (SSD-46543209) currently before the Commission for determination. The project is a 135-megawatt solar farm and battery energy storage system located approximately 2.5 kilometres east of Muswellbrook in the Muswellbrook Shire local government area and within the Hunter-Central Coast Renewable Energy Zone.

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40 My name is Neal Menzies, I'm the Chair of the Commission Panel and I am joined by my fellow commissioners, Suellen Fitzgerald and Michael Wright. And we're also joined by Kendall Clydsdale and Geoff Kwok from the Office of the Independent Planning Commission.

45 In the interest of openness and transparency and to ensure the full capture of information, today's meeting is being recorded, and a complete transcript will be produced and made available on the Commission's website.

This meeting is one part of the Commission's consideration of this matter and will form one of several sources of information upon which the Commission will base

its determination.

5 It's important for the Commissioners to ask questions of attendees and to clarify issues whenever it's considered appropriate. If you're asked a question and you're not in a position to provide an answer, please feel free to take the question on notice and provide any additional information in writing, which we will then put up on our website.

10 I request all members here today introduce themselves before speaking for the first time, and for all members to ensure that they do not speak over the top of each other, to ensure accuracy of the transcript. So, we can now begin and if I might start by asking the members of the Council delegation to introduce themselves.

15 **MR JEFF DRAYTON:** Jeff Drayton, and I'm the Mayor of Muswellbrook Council.

MR DEREK FINNIGAN: Good afternoon. Derek Finnigan. I'm the General Manager, Muswellbrook Shire Council.

20 **MS LEAH WARD:** I'm Leah Ward, the Executive Assistant.

MS THERESA FOLPP: I'm Theresa Folpp, Environmental Planning Officer with Muswellbrook Council.

25 **MS POPE:** And Sharon Pope, the Director of Environment and Planning at Muswellbrook Shire Council.

MR MENZIES: Okay. Are you going to make the presentation to us today? Yes?

30 **MR DRAYTON:** Yes, I will be, yes. Now, I will be and obviously I rely on our two officers to assist with any technical advice we require.

MR MENZIES: Sure. Great, Jeff. And I'll hand over to you to do that.

35 **MR DRAYTON:** Okay, thank you. I've broken it down into about six areas that we talk about, and I'll just be brief on each one initially. No doubt, you'll have some questions when we finish.

40 So, the first area is there's – we've had obviously a number of community concerns about the loss of agricultural land, probably not something new that, in an application I wouldn't have thought with solar at the moment. But certainly, the land that is involved in this application has relatively low carrying capacity, and due to the mining activity, some of the land hasn't been used regularly for farming and grazing activities for quite some time, for many years, in fact.

45 And it would certainly be preferable that the grazing occurs – we would prefer that grazing occurs under the panels, and the management of grass and weeds rather than relying on slacking and weed spraying. So, Council certainly supports the

proponent's commitment to exploring solar and agricultural integration to reduce those agricultural impacts. So, that's the first area.

5 The second area, again, directly from community concerns, is about the visual impact. Again, Council, we note that the visual impact from most of the nearby dwellings will be limited and screened by topography and vegetation. Many residents will, however, still be able to see the project, they'll be able to view it from Muscle Creek Road and as they travel between town and their residences, they'll be able to see these panels. And for this reason, Council also supports –
10 Council, sorry, supports proposed benefit sharing for nearby residents in the form of a land rate rebate administered with the assistance of obviously Council will be involved in that as well.

15 So, the third area is the roads related matters, too an important area to us. So, Council staff have been meeting now a number of times with multiple project proponents, ranging from EnergyCo with plans to construct 500 kV powerlines, Traffic New South Wales staff to construct the Muswellbrook bypass, Santos to construct the gas pipeline they propose, AGL with plans to construct a pumped hydro development, and several battery energy storage proposals, including this
20 one. So, there's been a number of them we've been meeting with regularly.

25 The cumulative impact of the consumption of the local road assets by multiple projects is difficult to manage. So, road safety for local road users is also important. These are not very popular roads – when I say “popular”, they're not very well-used roads. These are the roads, in this case, and certainly though, it'll increase the traffic dramatically.

30 So Council, we do not consider that the Department of Planning staff have fully understand this or incorporated the conditions into the Conditions of Consent that address our concerns about the roads. So, Council staff will address this further, but obviously as it's quite a complex issue, we'll also provide the commissioners with a written submission elaborating on these road requests. So, it's in relation, in this case, with the cumulative impacts of that road use.

35 So, the fourth area I'll talk about is in fact the disposal of solar panels. So, for the past 30 years, the open cut coal mines in the Hunter have been disposing of waste tyres on their individual sites. So, they have said that they have to bury them, and we – and there's – we ... Sorry, they've got to bury them as there's no way to recycle these tyres, and that's the case in our area at the moment. Council
40 estimates that in the Hunter alone, there are approximately 150,000 tyres being buried each year, becoming a legacy for future generations.

45 So, of course to us it's important that the solar panel industry and the projects are not permitted to follow this same path of generating a waste product but not actively working to find solutions to refurbish, reuse or recycle damaged or defective panels.

In the case of this proposal, industry experts have told us – certainly told Council

5 staff – that 10% of the panels that’ll be sent to this site for this project will be defective, damaged in transit, or damaged during construction. So, that’s around 30,000 panels just in the construction phase will be no good to use on the project. And Council’s waste management – we don’t have the ability, Council’s waste management facility doesn’t have the ability or the capacity to accept 30,000 solar panels.

10 So, Council, we requested a condition prohibiting landfill disposal of solar panels. Rather requiring them to be recycled, rehabilitated or reused. And this supports the Australian Circular Economy Framework, reduces strain on Council resources, and addresses concerns about public perception. With a preference for the proponent to engage directly with the recycling companies to enable this to occur.

15 To the fifth area, is a final – I’ll talk about – is a final Land Use Plan. So, post decommissioning and consideration of future employment opportunities, Council’s experience with closure of power stations and mines, shows how a community changes and becomes dependent on these temporary industries over the course of 30 years. It’s not acceptable for projects to say they’ll simply decommission, and the community bears a loss of jobs and confidence that results from that.

20 Council proposes a condition for the land use planned five years prior to decommissioning, to ensure effective site transition, appropriate land use, and/or alternative local employment opportunities.

25 And the sixth and final area I want to address is the accommodation. Of course, I spoke earlier about the cumulative impacts of roads, and of course there’ll be cumulative impact of accommodation for the temporary workforce as well. So, Council staff have been fielding enquiries from various projects mentioned earlier, to building temporary construction workforce accommodation on scattered sites across the shire is their proposal.

30 Council’s proposal is that we would prefer a better planned and coordinated approach, potentially accommodation shared by various projects at only one or two well-positioned locations within the shire, rather than just an ad-hoc approach of each proponent building a small village themselves.

35 So, that was the area just briefly. But they’re the six areas I’d like to address initially.

40 **MR MENZIES:** Thanks, Jeff, that was excellent, and you’ve raised a few of the things that we’d flagged as issues that we thought would be sensible to talk to you about. Just before getting into that discussion, the Panel would certainly welcome suggestions as to appropriate conditions from Council. So, if you want to put those in writing and send them to us, that would be very helpful indeed. Of course, we’re not guaranteeing that we’re going to pick them up and use them, but it certainly would help us to make sure we understand what you think would be appropriate conditions.

Okay. Let me hand over to my fellow commissioners. Suellen, do you want to kick off with issues that are close to your heart?

5 **MS SUELLEN FITZGERALD:** Thanks, Neal. Mr Mayor, my question in my mind is about the use of some of the C3 land that's been zoned for conservation as part of the southern array of this solar farm.

10 We've heard the Department's view on why solar panels could be permissible on this site. I'm interested in the Council's view of what that C3 zoning around the mine was initially designed to do and whether you're fully comfortable with the use of some of that C3 land for this proposal.

15 **MR DRAYTON:** Okay. Sharon will answer that.

MS FITZGERALD: Thank you.

20 **MS POPE:** Thank you, commissioners. Sharon Pope, the Director of Environment and Planning. Muswellbrook's LEP was one of the first LEPs prepared using the new statewide LEP template. None of us were actually at the Council at the time it was being prepared, but historical information I have seen, saw a deliberate intention by Council and the Department of Planning at that time to categorise a lot of land in Muswellbrook Shire as 'environmental protection' or as 'prime agricultural land'.

25 We didn't use the landscape, the agricultural or the rural landscape zone. I think in part at the time it was intended to use that zone to confine the location of open cut coal mines in the Council area. But subsequently the State Environmental Planning Policy made mining in the C3 zone permitted. We haven't been in and updated our LEP to reflect the fact that some of the C3 zoned land is actually an open cut mine. We felt it would be better to wait until post-mining land uses have been identified for these areas and look to update the zoning at that time.

30 So, we have relied more on the actual investigation of flora and fauna that exists on the site to identify if this is a suitable location for the solar panels, rather than just rely on the zone.

35 **MS FITZGERALD:** Right, thank you. Thanks, Sharon. So, you're saying that the biodiversity value of the land is a relevant criteria for you in thinking about the appropriateness of this at the moment, and that you may come back and revisit your C3 zonings once you've got perhaps a clearer direction of the future?

MS POPE: Correct.

40 **MS FITZGERALD:** Thank you. That's great. Thank you very much. That's helpful. Thanks, Neal.

MR MENZIES: Michael?

5 **MR MICHAEL WRIGHT:** Yes, thanks, Neal. And Mr Mayor, I'm interested in your commentary around accommodation and current trend, as you describe it, towards sort of scattered temporary accommodation. I can see the sense of perhaps looking at a more agglomerated approach to accommodation for these projects as they roll out across the REZ.

10 I know the proponent talks about hoping that 50% of the construction workforce will be locally sourced. Do you have confidence in that figure as well? We're aware of labour supply shortfalls generally. Is there sufficient labour locally to meet the construction needs of this project, and for that matter, other projects which are proposed or about to commence?

15 **MR DRAYTON:** I'd be very surprised if they've got the ability to source 50% of the workforce locally. I'd be very, very surprised indeed. I would imagine that the workforce would be almost exclusively an imported workforce.

20 We certainly, with industry around here at the moment, we're probably not unlike other areas, in fact we're certainly not worse, but we're certainly no better than other areas in respect of it's quite common now for industry around here to advertise for jobs and have no one apply. So, certainly I'd be very surprised if they could, yes ... I mean, it'd be lovely to think that'd be the case, but it's just – I just don't think it's possible.

25 **MR WRIGHT:** Yes. That then makes the accommodation issue more pressing, I suppose, because ...

30 **MR DRAYTON:** It does, and the projects I mentioned earlier aren't all the projects of course, they're just the key projects. And they, again, they would – and I won't say what ones – I probably can't remember offhand, but those projects, those other projects themselves, similar to this one, have already acknowledged to us that they just can't get a workforce locally and they would have to import it as well. And hence the importance for us – it's one of the reasons that we're in the process right now of talking to a lot of these proponents.

35 We have identified a large block of land we think would be suitable for a construction village. And we're in the process at the moment, about to commence the process at least of talking to these proponents, we already have had some preliminary conversations, been talking to all these proponents about accommodation. Because as I said, we don't want this ad-hoc approach where they might only have a hundred employees and they want to build some little pop-up village somewhere, and we have 10 or a dozen of these little villages popping up all over the place. We certainly – we want a lot better approach than that.

45 **MR WRIGHT:** And is there any sort of flow-on effect in terms of, I'm presuming there is a demand for services, obviously you can have that imported workforce, they need to go and see a doctor or whatever the case might be. Any views in terms of what impact this might have on service provision in Muswellbrook Shire

Council?

5 **MR DRAYTON:** Yes, that's obviously something we're considering as well. So, the area we have identified for a village has certainly hooked up to key services, water and sewer. So, it does – we have allowed for those provisions. But certainly, yes, we're in discussions about some other provisions, depending on the size, you know, the size of the camp. But even a 500 or 600-person village would certainly require some extra services, yes.

10 **MS POPE:** And EnergyCo, for the New England are currently doing a cumulative impact assessment that incorporates Muswellbrook Shire Council, because the 500 kV powerline project runs through this council area. And their counterparts in the Hunter-Central Coast REZ have said that if that work doesn't fully consider
15 Muswellbrook's cumulative impacts, they would have sums to do additional studies to look at the cumulative impacts in Muswellbrook, not just of that key infrastructure that they are building, but all of these different energy projects that are being proposed. We don't have the results of that of course, yet.

20 **MR FINNIGAN:** And could I also please add – Derek Finnigan, General Manager – the Mayor has spoken in the past around we want the accommodation, we'll need the accommodation to be a nature and quality so that it leaves a positive legacy for our community. I think that's very important to us as well.

25 **MS POPE:** Yes.

MR WRIGHT: Thank you, Mayor. Thank you, Sharon. Thank you, Derek.

30 **MS FITZGERALD:** Neal, I might just follow on with that. I did notice, Mr Mayor, in your submission to the Department, your original submission, you talked about an access fee, being able to contribute to social infrastructure in the Hunter REZ. Is that – I didn't quite follow the information you provided. Is that an initiative of EnergyCo?

35 **MR DRAYTON:** Yes, it is, yes.

MS FITZGERALD: Okay. So, that may follow on from these cumulative impact studies that they're currently doing, I gather.

40 **MS POPE:** That's correct. Yes.

MS FITZGERALD: Okay, okay, thank you.

45 **MR MENZIES:** One of the really interesting things in this, Mr Mayor, is the sharing of benefits to the community around the site. I don't think we've seen that before. It looks like a very attractive proposition. I just wonder how that came about, you know, is that an initiative of Council or the applicant? And also, what the community response to that has been?

MS POPE: So, thank you, commissioners, I will answer that one. As a Council, we're probably quite mature in our approach to community benefit sharing because of the various mines that operate in the Council area and have operated here for a couple of decades. We have individual voluntary planning agreements with those mines. But now the different energy projects have been approaching us, we realise we can't continue that way, we just don't have enough staff or enough community representatives to deal with the individual planning agreements.

So, it was a decision of Council to come up with a community benefit sharing policy, which we've adopted now. The intention in part is to try and pool the money so that the projects being delivered deliver real and lasting outcomes for the community without jeopardising our economic sustainability. That there are also some funds being secured for the long term, as the mines close.

Because at the moment, the mines fund a lot of the community activity. It could be sporting clubs getting shirts for their teams. It's the Upper Hunter Show that's held and funded partly by one of the mines. That funding will go once the mines close, but the community now is dependent on that funding. So, we're hoping by putting some money aside and investing it, we will have that money for the community into the future.

When we exhibited that policy for community feedback, I must admit we didn't receive very much. But we do in our community surveys with our community participation plan, receive a lot of feedback from the community that they want to see community activities continue to get funding in the long term, and that they have concern as well about the long-term access to funds.

This proponent did approach Council staff early to find out what the best approach was. Most of them come to us initially saying, "We want to build a playground in the local community," and in this case there's no substantial local community to build a playground for, and that would create economic sustainability issues. So, they have been very willing to follow Council's policy of community benefit sharing.

And likewise, when we spoke about benefits for the immediate residents who will be close to the solar farm, they initially suggested they would give them cheap power. But our thought is that that has an unintended consequence of encouraging people to use more power, and long term, in addition to reducing CO₂ emissions, we need to actually not use as much power as a community.

So, our suggestion was we give the residents a rebate on their land rates, and the proponent said, well that was a really option as well, particularly as on the rate notice it can say, "Rebate because you're living close to a solar farm."

MR MENZIES: Thanks, that makes a lot of sense. And as you say, as a Council, as a community, you have got a lot of experience and so seeing you developing these sorts of ideas – yes, it's very likely that other less-experienced councils will adopt them as well. So, yes, excellent, thank you for the explanation.

One of the other things that we've been talking about as a panel, but isn't really, not going to drive our decision one way or another. But we're interested in how the Council sees further residential expansion happening in your area. And whether the areas that are being put aside as stewardship areas impact on your planning. Are there any concerns for you there?

MS POPE: Thank you, commissioners. The proponents have approached us about those stewardship sites, and we did spend considerable time checking that they would not impact on future urban growth. Because of the steepness of some of that land, the difficulty in accessing that land because of the railway line and Muscle Creek and the existing plant communities on some of that land, it isn't identified for future urban growth.

We probably will be looking at land to the southeast of Muswellbrook on the southern side of the New England Highway as our main urban growth area in the long run.

MR MENZIES: Okay, yes. Thank you. Back to my fellow commissioners. Suellen?

MS FITZGERALD: Yes, thanks Neal. I was going to open the thorny question of roads. Mr Mayor, you talked about cumulative impacts and that you weren't at the moment happy with the Conditions of Consent as they were put in draft. Would you like to flesh that out a little bit for us?

MR DRAYTON: Sharon, you can ...

MS POPE: Thank you, commissioners. This is quite detailed, so it will be in our written submission. But in general terms, there's a little bit missing in there about dilapidation, reviews, and there's some errors in the current Conditions as a result of the feedback from Transport for New South Wales. So, for Sandy Creek Road, there needs to be a limitation that the total maximum vehicle length is 19 metres, and they currently have 26 metres. So, that needs to be modified.

Probably one of the crucial things that has come up and was before we did our original submission, is the fact that all these other projects are now approaching us as well. Again, from our maturity in dealing with the mines and the fact that most of those use common roads as well, the Department of Planning and Council prepared a contributions plan for a road called Thomas Mitchell Drive a number of years back. And based on the workforces and projected transport movements for the different mines, the upgrading and ongoing maintenance of that road is apportioned across the mines using that plan.

Now that we've got these other projects also proposing to use Muscle Creek Road and Sandy Creek Road, we consider it's going to be really difficult to say that it was Muswellbrook Solar Farm that consumed the road asset and caused the eventual damage to the roads that now need to be repaired. There's going to be

five, maybe six different projects with different volumes of heavy vehicles.

And so we're proposing that we need to prepare a similar plan that we have for Thomas Mitchell Drive for Sandy Creek Road and for Muscle Creek Road. And that we will then have to apportion those repair works and possibly upgrading works across the different projects.

Complicated by the fact that, say, for both the pumped hydro project and the 500 kV powerline, and even Santos' gas pipeline, they will be using sections of road further east along Muscle Creek Road and it might be that they are solely responsible for the upgrades of some of those sections of road. So, it's a key section of road really, from the highway to the turnoff to Muswellbrook Solar Farm on both Sandy Creek Road and Muscle Creek Road that will be shared in common with all of the projects.

So, we will be looking – we haven't yet crafted that condition, but we will be looking to nominate a condition that speaks toward if this plan had been prepared by Council prior to commencement of construction, that they will contribute funds as per that plan. And in recent discussions with EnergyCo, they've indicated they would consider supporting Council with the funds required to prepare those plans, so that they can be done expeditiously.

MS FITZGERALD: Thanks, thanks for that. And Neal, it sounds like we'll look forward to getting drafts of these conditions from Council.

MR MENZIES: Very much so. Michael?

MR WRIGHT: Yes. Just on that Muscle Creek Road section, Sharon, you were talking about there. I know it currently takes 26 metre B-doubles, so it sounds like it's fairly heavily used up to the southern entrance to this site. That's correct, isn't it?

MS POPE: It was in the past. Now that Muswellbrook Coal Mine has ceased mining activity, most of the heavy vehicle movements have ceased, and it's just a few vehicles loaded for rehabilitation of the site that now use that road. We have a separate discussion at the moment still with Muswellbrook Coal about a final dilapidation survey to capture what damage they may have done to that road and the handing back of that asset to Council. Because Muswellbrook Coal have actually been maintaining that section of road for the last 20-odd years.

MR WRIGHT: From a road safety perspective, I know there's an existing prohibition on heavy vehicles using Sandy Creek Road during school peak hours to avoid interactions with school buses, I'm presuming. But I think school buses also use Muscle Creek Road – I think that's the case, from what I've read. And the proponent appears to have indicated that they'd be open to considering limiting the use of that road by its heavy vehicles during those peak hours. Does Council think that will be a useful thing for them to consider?

5 **MS POPE:** Yes, that would be. We perhaps haven't pressed as hard for that restriction on Muscle Creek Road because the road standard from the highway to the entry to the Muswellbrook Coal site has been upgraded in the past and is a much higher standard than Sandy Creek Road is. But it is always much safer if there's no conflict between construction heavy vehicles and the school buses.

10 **MR DRAYTON:** Yes, there is only, on both of those roads, Sandy Creek Road and Muscle Creek Road, there is only one bus service each day. So, one trip in and one trip home each day. So, it's certainly not a big issue to avoid that bus time.

15 **MR WRIGHT:** And can I just ask a question, going back to the Mayor's commentary around a final Land Use Plan. Was it your proposal that that be a Condition of Consent, that that transition plan you're proposing leads to a future land use five years prior to the decommissioning, be actually a Condition of Consent?

MR DRAYTON: Yes, that's right.

20 **MS POPE:** Sorry, commissioners, yes, again, we did propose a condition to the Department of Planning and they haven't included it. So, we will propose it again.

MR WRIGHT: Sure. Thank you.

25 **MS FITZGERALD:** Just following on, Neal, from that question. Is that something that's commonly done with the mines in the district? Have they previously been preparing Land Use Plans post closure?

30 **MS POPE:** Commissioners, the older consents for mines did not include those sorts of conditions. And now we're facing mine closure across the Hunter, not just near Muswellbrook, the various local government areas have realised that that has created certain issues. That we are now very dependent on the employment opportunities and the loss of those jobs will badly impact on communities. So, the newer modifications and the newer mines now do include that as a Condition of Consent.

35 **MS FITZGERALD:** Thanks, Sharon. So, there is a precedent for this, yes? Thank you.

40 **MR DRAYTON:** There is.

45 **MR MENZIES:** Okay. I think we're getting pretty close to the end of our sets of questions. I was – I started my reading for this matter with the Council's submission, and it was a really good scene setter, so thank you for that. Because it made me attentive to a spectrum of things in my other readings. One of the things that you suggested in there that the applicant hasn't taken up is that even though visual impacts are low or moderate, that they should still consider being willing to put up vegetation screening, offer vegetation screening for community.

5 Could you just elaborate on that one a little, and once again, a sense of the feedback that you're getting from the community about this proposal. Is the community very exercised by it? We of course had the submissions, but they come in early. Various things that you've done may have changed the tenor of discussion in the community.

10 **MS POPE:** We would certainly still like to see additional screen planting. And as most of that planting would actually be along the creek, it would improve the riparian environment of that creek, which has been very modified through the years of farming and then consequently mining.

15 I'm not sure why the proponent doesn't feel it would be a good idea. But we certainly would look to see more screen planting, and the fencing of those planted areas, so when there is agricultural activity occurring under the panels, that the animals aren't eating any of the planted screening areas.

20 **MR MENZIES:** Yes, it's difficult for us not having visited the site yet, so we will visit the site, but that – you know, it's really hard to put things in a spatial context until you actually go there. So, I hadn't quite grasped that the additional planting would be along the creek line, but there's so many additional benefits then as well as the screening. So yes, it's an interesting argument, thank you.

Fellow commissioners, do we have other questions?

25 **MS FITZGERALD:** Neal, just one, and I guess it's about the cumulative impacts again. Thinking about the Muswellbrook bypass, do you see this as being a significant – do you think it will significantly change views and impacts of this project on surrounding residents? Or is that really in the detail of the design? Are you in a position to put in an opinion about that?

30 **MS POPE:** Yes, commissioners. The bypass is on the western side of the solar farm, so it doesn't exist between most of the residents and the solar farm. So, it would not remove any of that vegetation in that screens the solar farm from the residents.

35 The bypass will change the outlook for some of those residents. They will most definitely see this new road, as it has to travel up or pass up a hill, and there will need to be cut-ins, there will be changes to the landform, and obviously some vegetation will be removed as well. But I don't think the bypass itself removes
40 vegetation that would screen the solar farm from most of the residents.

45 **MS FITZGERALD:** Thanks, Sharon. As our Chair said, without being on site yet, it's sometimes quite hard to interpret what you're reading spatially. So, thank you for that. Thanks, Neal.

MR WRIGHT: And Neal, just I might follow-up on another question in terms of cumulative impact. With the yet-to-be-approved pumped hydro project, in for the mine voids, I think, in terms of – I'm not sure whether Council has a view in terms

of what that might look like around its physical infrastructure. Does Council have a view about whether that's going to exacerbate visual impact for residents in the area?

5 **MS POPE:** So, commissioners, at the moment, we're relying on information provided in the Scoping Report for that project plus some visual display material that AGL have prepared. The bottom reservoir is an old open cut mine pit, and the majority of the infrastructure that will appear in that void would not be viewed from residents in the area.

10 The upper reservoir does require part of that – a large hill to the north of this site being ... It's hard to describe it, but essentially, they're going to dig into the top of that hill to create a turkey nest-style of dam. So, there will be trees removed from the top of that hill, that I think people will notice in the short term.

15 They have taken on board a lot of concerns we raised earlier about the visual impact of the pikes running from the upper to the lower reservoir, and they're now proposing that they will be tunnelled and completely underground. So, that removed a lot of the visual impacts that this project had.

20 **MR DRAYTON:** I don't think there'll be too many visual impacts from the pumped hydro.

25 **MR WRIGHT:** Thank you. And Neal, sorry, one more question if I may. So, we had a discussion about employment, local employment. There's obviously a transition, economic transition and social transition, I presume, in Muswellbrook Shire Council and other parts of the Hunter Valley going through as we move away from fossil fuel extraction.

30 How are these – do you have a view in terms of how these renewable energy projects will play out in the sort of longer term, say, the next 15 to 30 years in terms of social/economic cohesion? If that's too hard to answer – I know it's speculative, but ...

35 **MS POPE:** So, commissioners, I think we have coal-fired power stations as well as coal mines in our council area. Some of the people who work at the coal-fired power stations and probably have the technical expertise to get employment in the future of, say, the pumped hydro, at the battery energy storage facilities, the solar farms, and wind farms. But I would say the majority of the people employed at the
40 coal mines would not have those skills. They mainly have the skills related to driving vehicles and maintaining vehicles, and they would need training to take on roles in the renewable energy space.

45 It's also the quantum of jobs. The mines are very labour intensive in reality. These renewable energy projects post construction only require a small number of people. I think, for Council, what we see is if they are approved, we would aim to capitalise on their presence by encouraging industry that supports the fabrication and manufacturing of solar panels and wind blades, that supports the

refurbishment and reconditioning of batteries, to establish here in Muswellbrook.

Partly it serves the local projects but also acknowledging Muswellbrook, everything comes through Muswellbrook, everything going to the Central West, everything going to the New England comes through Muswellbrook. So, we're actually so well located. We have obviously a lot of labour both here and in the Lower Hunter in close proximity to our local government area, close proximity to the port. We just think we're ideal, so we would try to capitalise on these projects by having co-dependent type activities and businesses located here.

MR WRIGHT: Sounds very sensible. Thanks, Sharon.

MR DRAYTON: To give you an idea on numbers we're talking, so 2030 two mines will close, fossil fuels. About 12,000 employees and the mix is about a 70/30 mix, so 70% are, as Sharon spoke about, would be sort of unqualified, would be only qualified to operate a machine, 30% would be skilled people with trade. So yes, we've got a big job to do to upskill people, you know, 70% of 12,000 people, and that's in 2030, so.

MR WRIGHT: It's a lot of people, yes.

MR MENZIES: Okay. Fellow commissioners, any last questions?

MS FITZGERALD: No, Neal, I'm done.

MR MENZIES: All right. So, Council, thank you for a very useful and informative and actually very interesting discussion. That was great to get your insights. We certainly look forward to receiving suggested conditions from you, that would be very helpful to us. And for that matter, any other information that you think is sensible to provide us, following up on this conversation.

So, thank you very much both for the submissions that you made early in the piece, but also for the information you've provided us. We look forward to visiting early February to see the site, depending on whether people register for a townhall meeting, we may or may not be holding a meeting in the shire, so, but it's still open for registrations at the moment.

So, look, thank you very much for the discussion this afternoon. That certainly has been useful to us, and Mr Mayor, staff, thanks for your input, it's been great.

MR DRAYTON: Thank you, commissioners.

MR MENZIES: We'll call the meeting to a close.

[All say thank you]

>THE MEETING CONCLUDED 00:48:38