



**The Brookings Institution
Reimagine Rural podcast**

“Farming for wind in rural Michigan”

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Guests:

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MATT GRAHAM, Farmer, Rosebush, Michigan
PAUL GROSS, Extension Agent (retired), Michigan State University
TRACY HOUSE, Farmer, Mount Pleasant, Michigan
ALBERT JONGEWAARD, Public Engagement, Apex Clean Energy
SARAH MILLS, Associate Professor, University of Michigan
DAN SCRIPPS, Chair, Michigan Public Service Commission
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Episode Summary:

The land and resources needed for the transition to clean energy are found disproportionately in rural places. Many rural communities now find themselves faced with a potential for clean energy development that brings both economic opportunities and political tensions, especially with the implementation of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act. In this episode, Tony Pipa visits Isabella County, Michigan, to learn how a small group of farmers came together to create a community-minded revenue-sharing lease that helped overcome the controversy and resulted in the largest wind farm in the state.

[wind turbine sound; music]

GRAHAM: I'm not one to make a quick decision. I just first wanted to do some research, visit some other wind farms to, to you know, see if this was a fit for us or not. And we did that. We visited some, some wind farms and it, I really wasn't excited about it when we first started. I didn't like the way things were put together. I didn't like the controversy that was involved in the different other wind farms in our state. I didn't like that. And so, as a group, we changed a lot of things, and it made things more of a fit to keep peace in the community.

PIPA: Windmills. They have a long history in rural America. Colonists used them to grind grain, pump water, and saw wood. In the drive to settle the west, the landscape was dotted with thousands of wind-generated water pumps used by homesteaders and ranchers. And now the modern version of a windmill—a wind turbine—is part of the drive to switch to renewable energy, a transition that is opening up a *lot* of opportunity in rural places throughout the country.

The energy transition is not *just* about wind; it's also about capturing the energy of the sun, mining new minerals, and manufacturing new products such as batteries and vehicles powered by clean energy. All those activities depend upon the abundant land and resources disproportionately found in rural places, putting rural America at the heart of this transition.

But, as Matt Graham, a farmer in Rosebush, Michigan, suggests, putting in a wind farm often creates controversy at the local level. Matt and other local farmers and leaders experienced this directly when Apex Clean Energy began putting together plans to create Michigan's largest wind farm in Isabella County, where they live. The project surfaced issues and trade-offs about individual property rights, shared public resources, local zoning and decisionmaking, and state and national policy priorities that I'll explore in today's episode of *Reimagine Rural*.

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I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution, and your host for *Reimagine Rural*, the podcast where I visit rural places experiencing change, get the story from local residents and leaders, and explore the implications and intersections with public policy.

Now, the wind farm in Isabella County was ultimately constructed and began operations in 2021, so the events you'll hear about happened several years ago. But they remain extremely relevant today, as significant numbers of rural communities continue to consider the installation of a wind or solar farm, or both. In addition, an array of new local and state laws are being passed across the country, some designed to support these projects, others focused on discouraging them, and significant resources are available through the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021.

Matt Graham's family has been farming in Rosebush for over 100 years. He describes how the conversation began with Apex Clean Energy.

[3:32]

GRAHAM: Well, we have a retail meat store here at our farm. And we had a Apex representative stop in and inquire about putting a wind farm here through our township. And we're one of the larger landowners in the township. They came to us first and kind of felt things out.

PIPA: Now, as you heard, Matt had reservations from the start. He questioned whether it would be good for the area. And his initial skepticism was shared by the other farmers I talked to in Isabella County.

[4:07]

HOUSE: And when you think of wind turbines, how do they fit into our community? And definitely, the first thought was to step out and take a look at the horizon, and what would it look like?

[music]

That is the first thing that came to mind. And do I really want to see that? So, I think first stepping into it, there were some reservations whether I wanted to change the landscape.

PIPA: That's Tracy House, a dairy farmer in nearby Mount Pleasant. He's describing one of the major issues that local residents usually bring up: how will turbines change the landscape? After all, the natural beauty of rural places is one of its key advantages. People also wonder about the noise that might be produced, the risk to birds or other wildlife, or the extent to which soil is used, managed, and compacted in order to install and operate a turbine.

Funny thing about farmers, or at least this group of farmers. Skeptical or not, they do their due diligence. Tracy hit the road to learn more about what wind farms could mean for him and his community.

[5:20]

HOUSE: I took my family and went to a wind farm on our own. Just pulled in the middle of a wind farm, got out of the car, and just stood, listened, looked. And then we also would drive right up underneath the turbine and listen and just to get a feel for it.

PIPA: Bob Walton, who is not only a lifelong Isabella County farmer but also an Isabella Township trustee, started talking to counterparts in other states.

[6:06]

WALTON: My thoughts originally were, is this something we really want for our area? I too did a bunch of research. I was judging a horse show in Oklahoma. Of course, they've had turbines for quite a while. So, I asked around, who should I talk to? I was able to talk to somebody that I knew already from showing horses. And man, did he have the negative comments.

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But again, it was a lease down there that across the fence from him somebody had a windmill, and they didn't. When I explained to him what type of lease we were looking at his attitude completely changed.

PIPA: So, yes, Matt, Bob, Tracy, and Isabella County farmers like them were skeptical about Apex Energy's proposal to build giant wind turbines on leased farmland and the other open spaces in their rural communities. However, they all wanted to make an honest appraisal of the pros and cons, rather than give a reflexive "no" or "yes." They began to talk among themselves and as Matt describes, turned to Paul Gross, an extension agent from Michigan State University.

[7:22]

GRAHAM: And then then the word kind of got out and we all kind of came together. Thankful to our extension agent, Paul Gross. He kind of got involved and it was his idea that put together a steering committee that we could all come together, and put our minds together, and make sure that we had all our ducks in a row. And, then we had another wind company that was also involved. So, we had two companies that were interested and we kind of took things from there and meeting after meeting kind of came to an agreement and put a lease together.

PIPA: Since he was their extension agent, the farmers all knew and trusted Paul. He was a local and a farmer himself.

[8:10]

GROSS: I grew up right here in Isabella County. So, I grew up in Nottawa Township and left to go to school at Michigan State University and was fortunate enough to be able to land a job in Isabella County with Michigan State University. And from a dairy farm. Still have a small farm. I'm a landowner. Ao, I guess you'd say I have a little skin in the game.

But being with MSU, I mean, one of the things that we do is provide non-biased information. So, as this project started and as it developed and as we moved along, I felt like I had to provide as much leadership as I could providing the non-biased information and not really take a side on the issue.

My role was first of all to provide information on wind farms and leases and the experience that I had, and some of my colleagues in the thumb of Michigan and in Gratiot County where some of the development had already taken place, I had a pretty good network of educators and ag economists that had worked in the communities where these wind farms were developed.

PIPA: Paul had some familiarity with energy leases, as a few farmers had previously negotiated oil or gas deals. He felt like the farmers could work together to apply some of those experiences and craft something that made sense for Isabella County.

[9:36]

GROSS: Just a little more background maybe is because of the oil and gas leasing in Michigan, Michigan State University Extension had a lot of resources for landowners on leasing, the dos and don'ts. We've had some experience here in the county. It seems like every ten years an oil company would come through and start leasing up land. And I think in my lifetime I've seen at least three of them. So, we had some experience with land leasing. The leases were a little bit different, but the concepts are the same.

We were able to have educational meetings in the oil and gas industry in that world so where we brought landowners together to say, wait a minute, don't just sign the first thing that they put under you. Let's look and see if we can build something or develop something that has more value for you as landowners. So, make some changes in the lease.

So, we had a little bit of experience with that. And I think I applied a lot of that knowledge that I gained over the years through the oil and gas industry and applied it to the wind industry.

I can't say how important it was to have the group together, the coalition of farmers that came together to work on this. And, it wasn't just a group of farmers, it was actually a group of what I consider very key, well-respected farmers in the community that put the time and effort in to do the diligence, to do what was best for the community, not just for their own farm.

PIPA: Paul knew these farmers, but he also knew that his job was not to convince anyone of anything. He wanted to help them work it through together and make sure everyone got the information they needed to make well-informed decisions.

[11:20]

GROSS: I know there was a lot of skepticism up front from the individual farmers when they came in because some of them had experience with the oil and gas leases and some of not such a good experience.

And from a wind farm standpoint, I think a lot of the farmers were a little skeptical. Just I know that some of them would talk about you know, it's going to change your landscape And, do they want that, or don't they want that? So, I have to say that a lot of the farmers, or at least the farmers on the group, were a little skeptical until they did their homework.

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And we were able to get opportunities to travel together, talk to other wind farm people at least. We even talked to different attorneys that had been involved in it. So, I think we did our homework, and I think my role was, I was trying to facilitate as best I could.

PIPA: And so, this informal group started to meet regularly to learn about and consider this opportunity together. Matt Graham's farm became its unofficial headquarters for coffee and conversation, and even trip planning.

[12:30]

GRAHAM: We started putting together meetings and we hosted them right here at the farm. And, as time went on, it was a really good decision. We made a lot of good decisions as far as definitely keeping peace with all the farmers, where everybody got treated fairly. And it was just a really good thing. And it went well.

We went over into the thumb area where there was a heavy population of windmills and different farms. And it was a very good experience.

PIPA: Matt is referring to the thumb of the lower peninsula of Michigan, a central region in the state that had experience with wind projects. And the more the farmers learned, the more they saw potential benefits, as Tracy House explains.

[13:16]

HOUSE: The more information we got—and you see them up and running and how clean it looks around them, how we can farm around them, the additional income what that can do—the more facts we got, the more it was like this could be beneficial and it could be beneficial to a lot of people in our community.

PIPA: And the more they learned, the more they became convinced that if the project were to move forward, they'd have to take a community-centered approach. Matt Graham explains.

GRAHAM: Well, after researching some of these other farms, one farmer around one side of the fence was getting all the money and the guy on the other side was getting nothing and it was causing big controversy.

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So, we came back and had a meeting and discussed it that we need to have this fair to everybody.

PIPA: So, while these farmers were doing their due diligence, making visits and learning from others, what was Apex Energy, the company behind the project, doing, I wondered? Well, as we know from so many stories on the podcast, for change to happen in a community, local people have to trust the key protagonists and the process. So, I spoke to Albert Jongewaard, who was part of Apex Energy's public engagement team during the development of this project.

[14:38]

JONGEWAARD: Not everyone necessarily likes the idea of a wind farm. Now, change is hard. I get that. Change happens. It's a given in life. But then you have a company like us or the group like us coming to town and we're proposing to build five, 600-foot-tall wind turbines. Some that might have blinking red lights on top. And you can't hide the wind turbine. Nothing you do to hide it.

And there are people out there who just might not want to look at a wind turbine, and I can respect that, or who might not be comfortable with the idea of change unfolding in their community. Again, maybe it's outside their control. And so, not everybody's

immediately on board with the idea, and we definitely ran into a situation, and we run into that situation anywhere you try to do this type of work.

But we had a concerned group of citizens in Isabella County. And we had a lot of questions from landowners who were maybe on board with the project and who, at one point or another, may not have had all the answers to questions that they were being asked.

And so, I found myself spending a lot of time in the community and eventually moved, actually physically moved to Isabella County to work with the community and just be present to answer a lot of those questions, go to a lot of the meetings, get to meet with the farmers on their turf, at the shop or wherever it might be.

PIPA: That's right, Albert just up and moved to Isabella County. But it wasn't so he could be there as a pitchman, or an adversary to drive a hard bargain with this informal group that was emerging. He saw his job as building relationships and providing accurate information.

[16:11]

JONGEWAARD: There are a lot of moving parts. Figuring out where wind turbines go is really the last thing that we actually have any line of sight on, so there's a lot of just different dynamics that go into building the wind farm.

And a big piece of that is public acceptance, working with landowners where we're asking them to consider doing business with us for potentially 50 years. If you have a 50-year lease that's a heavy question to put on somebody. So, it doesn't happen overnight.

And in order to do it successfully, I think it's safe to say that you've got to have a level of trust with the landowners, with the community in general. We're proposing to do something that's brand new. It hadn't been done before by definition. So, it's a big request.

PIPA: It also meant understanding the relationship between farmers and their land, where land is not just a place to earn a livelihood, but it's something central to one's way of life, including future generations.

[17:02]

JONGEWAARD: You know, I kind of joke as we work with, with farmers or work with landowners, their land is a source of pride. That's not just something to be taken for granted. The joke I'll make sometimes is we're talking to farmers and we're asking them to do something with their land, the land is sometimes more important than certain members of their family. I mean, it's a piece of the family. Sometimes it has higher value than certain members of the family. And so, I've said this publicly and I've been corrected by a couple of farmers, they're like, no, it's not a joke. That's, that's the truth.

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And so, whatever the dynamic may be, we're asking farmers to trust us to work with them to do something on their land that's a source of pride for them. And so, that's not to be taken lightly. I think trust and the personal relationships go a long way in terms of helping us be successful in trying to build something like a wind farm.

PIPA: And it's not just the landowners on one side and the energy company on the other. These decisions also implicated local governments as well as other public institutions, such as the local school board. Bill Chilman, who at the time was the superintendent of Beal City Public Schools in Isabella County, describes to me how he approached the situation.

[18:14]

CHILMAN: I am an earth science guy. I love rural, all that stuff. But I'm also not the tree hugging type of person that's going to say, hey, we need to go to all this green energy and totally get rid of all of our combustion engines and fossil fuels. I'm a believer in diversifying the electrical grid. That comes from my background in earth science as well as some of the things that I've studied in regards to politics and things over time. But that's what I believe. I believe diversifying the electrical grid. And each organization, each family had to take a look at how this was going to benefit them and help them meet the mission that they were trying to set.

And it was easy for the school. It was going to generate a lot of money for me to provide this high-quality environment and a place for my students and staff to work and do well in. And so, that's the way I approached it with the Board. We can't say we don't want to look at them or those things because our mission at the school was to provide the high-quality education and a high-quality environment. And this was a way to do that.

PIPA: But all these folks recognized that it was legitimate for their neighbors and local stakeholders to have concerns. Here's Tracy House.

[19:34]

HOUSE: You know, the anti-thought behind the wind farm, I understand that. And again, I had those reservations from the beginning. And it can split a community somewhat. And again, you're on the opposite side of the fence or everybody is before the construction and development and here they are, is, well, what really is it going to look like?

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So, I know a lot of folks had a lot of reservations. And if you weren't a large landowner, I'm sure the financial didn't help them as much.

PIPA: These are tough community decisions with real-life trade-offs. The towers themselves are hundreds of feet high, and the propeller blades reach even higher. They change the landscape, they alter the view, they require new access roads to have to be built, they have lights, and, yes, if you listen very closely, you can hear a bit of noise. As Bill Chilman describes, it can be hard to steer clear of the politics and stay focused on weighing the pros and cons.

[20:40]

CHILMAN: It was tense for a little while out in Beal. It is a small town and we had family members who were on opposite sides of situations, and we had people come to the school because they thought that we were I don't know what they thought. We didn't have any control over what happened. But I was supportive as an individual of the wind farm.

And so, I think that we took a little heat for that at the school, but at the same time I tried to not politicize it. I believe that there were a lot of people that were trying to do the rightwing, leftwing thing. They were trying to politicize it. I took the politics out of it from the school's perspective. And our mission as a school is to do whatever we can with what we have to provide the best education and the best educational environment possible for our students.

PIPA: So, it's hard enough just with local landowners, families, neighbors, and friends trying to work out what's collectively best for them. It gets even harder as outside interests get involved. And they do get involved.

[21:43]

WALTON: Matt talked about going and visiting other wind farms. The first one we visited the guy told us two things. Number one, lawyer up. Number two, be prepared for outside resistance. And their thing is, don't fight this with facts, hassle your township and county officials till they get so sick of it, they walk away.

PIPA: That was Bob Walton, and that bit of advice was prescient. You might recall that Bob is not only a farmer, but a township trustee. He ended up being the target of three different recall petitions, none of which passed. There were also petitions to make zoning decisions at the township level rather than at the county level, which Michigan laws allow. Those also failed.

[22:31]

WALTON: As far as the resistance, it definitely was fueled outside our community. Definitely.

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In fact, I got into an argument on Facebook with one of these outside people when I asked him where in the heck he was from. He told me. I says, then stay out of my community. He said, I pay taxes. I've got every right.

PIPA: This shows how an already complicated situation, with trade-offs and tough decisions that can divide neighbors and community members as they consider these clean energy installations, can turn a local project into a larger battleground around climate change involving outside interests. Albert Jongewaard says it's something that the company sees happen regularly.

[23:16]

JONGEWAARD: The reality is that there are organizations or groups who stand in opposition to wind energy development. And that's a national thing. There seems to be individuals or organizations in most states who might band together to organize against this type of development. That definitely happened in Isabella County. Local people have the ability through social media and other means to tap into larger organizations or efforts to object to something like a wind farm. We dealt with that.

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To the extent that this project in particular, or these projects in general become political, I think it's a shame, because this is not a political issue. It shouldn't be a political issue. And I tried to make that point clear.

PIPA: Now, as we heard, the farmers themselves were skeptical, and other residents and neighbors had their own concerns. What I love about this story is how this group of farmers developed a lease that took those concerns seriously and tried to maximize the benefits all around.

But before we get to that, it's clear that local decisionmaking can quickly get caught up in larger politics around the country's energy supply and taking action on climate change. The project to install wind turbines in rural Isabella County, Michigan, is emblematic of at least two distinct but interrelated policy themes. As with all the stories in this podcast, there's what's happening on the ground—the building of offshore and onshore wind, deploying broadband, a town's relationship with a major employer, and so on—and then there are policy patterns and goals implicated in that activity.

Wind capacity in the United States has already more than doubled from 2014 to 2023. But one analysis estimates that annual installation rates will need to be nearly double that of what we did in 2023 if we're going to achieve the nation's greenhouse gas reduction goals. The amount of land needed for all those wind turbines could end up being as big as the entire state of Texas. That means a lot of local communities having to make decisions like the one faced by Isabella County. And increasingly, those decisions are getting tougher. About 15 percent of counties nationwide now have some impediment to new utility-scale solar or wind projects.

For some perspective on this broader context, I turned to Sarah Mills, who's an associate professor of practice at the University of Michigan, where she directs the Center for Empowering Communities at the Graham Sustainability Institute.

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MILLS: I study the impacts that large-scale renewable energy projects have on the rural communities that will host them. I think it might be helpful background to know that my Ph.D. isn't actually an energy; it's in farmland preservation. So, I come at energy by thinking about how it may be a tool to help advance farmland preservation effectively.

But since then, a lot of my work is very applied, and it's helping local governments understand the pros and cons of renewables. I help them translate what it is, how they see renewables fitting in their community into their zoning ordinances, their local land use policies.

PIPA: Sarah's an acknowledged expert in Michigan and nationally on how rural areas approach these projects. Her rural roots—as she says, she grew up at the end of a dirt road—give her a unique perspective.

[26:58]

MILLS: Very often the way that siting of renewables is framed is asking a rural community to solve a global climate problem, or to solve a state level kind of energy problem. Right? Asking that rural community to like do one solid for us. I think my vision or what I hope, where I think this could be real opportunity, like, seeing the opportunity that there is in renewables and having that renewables project, that wind farm or that solar farm, be the solution to a longstanding problem in that community.

And so, whether that is like shoring up the tax base or that it's providing jobs for a loss of other jobs, or it is making sure that the family farms can stay in business, or it is providing the tax revenue that the school district needs so that they don't have to consolidate, or it is just providing a new sense of place. Not all places want to stay exactly as they are right now. They want to evolve.

But having the renewables project, I think our conversation would be very different if renewables projects were the solution that the community has been seeking.

PIPA: I asked Sarah about the role that misinformation or disinformation plays in creating controversy at the local level when these projects are under consideration, since that's often the focus of these stories when they're presented in the national media. She told me her research has shown that those types of campaigns definitely exist. But she pointed out that they don't always take hold, and they're not always effective. When they are effective, it's often because different people in the community have different reasons for living there, and so there's a clash of objectives going on.

[28:51]

MILLS: But what I tell them is that farmland preservation can mean different things to different people. And some people are preserving farmland to preserve a vista. Right? Some people think about, planners think about, farmland preservation as preserving an urban boundary. So, you keep the people who need urban services in the cities. So, you don't have to extend water and sewer out to the countryside.

But there's also, often farmers who think about farmland preservation is they're thinking about farmland preservation and preserving a livelihood, making ends meet. Right? And so, if you take the case of wind turbines, right, it undoubtedly changes the view. So, if your definition of farmland preservation is preserving a view, like, that's a big red X, strike against a wind farm.

But if your definition of farmland preservation is preserving farm livelihood and you know you've got guaranteed revenue of a few thousand dollars, eight thousand dollars, whatever it is every year from that turbine that you have on your property, that's helping you make ends meet.

And so, I think some of this is just people have different goals. They're living in the community for different reasons.

PIPA: As Sarah points out, this gets complicated by who does and doesn't get a lease.

[30:14]

MILLS: I think another key part of this is kind of the haves versus have nots. Right? And so, there are a range of reasons why not everybody in the community can have a wind turbine on their property.

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First of all, wind turbines steal wind from each other. And so, they've got to be spaced out so the wind can recuperate going from one to the other. And so, even if everybody wanted a wind turbine on their property, it might not be possible for everyone to have one.

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PIPA: All these considerations get complicated by the fact that the laws in different states give different levels of authority to local jurisdictions. In fact, in Michigan, a new law gives the state expanded authority to approve large energy projects.

Dan Scripps, who's the chair of the Michigan Public Service Commission, talked to me about the broader policy context on clean and renewable energy that Isabella County is a part of. The Public Service Commission is a state agency that oversees rates for public utilities like electric and gas, and siting approval for pipelines and high voltage electricity transmission lines.

[31:21]

SCRIPPS: I think you've seen stepped up ambitions around clean energy and renewable energy deployment. We passed our first renewable portfolio standard in 2008, and that required us to achieve a minimum of 10 percent of renewable resources on the grid by 2015. In 2016, that was stepped up to 15 percent renewables by 2021.

And then in the last legislative session in 2023 the legislature expanded that pretty significantly, going to 50 percent renewables by 2030, 60 percent by 2035, all as part of a drive to get to 100 percent clean energy by 2040.

So, you've seen growth in the renewable sector in Michigan. And that's been added to it in addition to the mandates through utility integrated resource plans and the voluntary green purchasing programs that the utilities run where we've seen significant interest, particularly in the industrial sector, but also by a number of

residential customers in voluntarily going above and beyond the minimums set in statute and even the amounts that were ultimately found to be reasonable and prudent as part of the long-term energy plans filed by the utilities.

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PIPA: In Michigan, a zoning ordinance can be adopted by a township, village, or a county. As we've heard, wind farms generally extend over large areas of land because the turbines have to be spaced out. This means one township can decide to pass a zoning ordinance that effectively stops a project that encompasses and benefits people in other townships or villages or parts of the county; and that also has implications for the state's energy security and independence.

It can get pretty complex putting together a feasible project and balancing all the considerations fairly. In fact, as Bob Walton recounts, when the Isabella County project was under consideration, who was in charge of local zoning became a contentious issue.

[33:19]

WALTON: We have county zoning. They did a petition to put local zoning in our township. It was flat turned down. All the townships were that way. Cause their thing is divide and conquer.

PIPA: Dan Scripps from the Public Utilities Commission explains how the new law gives developers the option to go to the state on certain projects.

[33:42]

SCRIPPS: For most things, and I think this is appropriate, it really does go through the local zoning board, and often through the Board of Appeals, and then ultimately a decision by the township government. And we've got more than 500 individual townships in Michigan. So, this really does vest a lot of those decisions at the local level. But there are also exceptions and have long been exceptions to that practice.

And so, in the last legislative session in 2023, the legislature ultimately, I think, tried to strike a balance between those local prerogatives and understanding that for some of this infrastructure, particularly larger projects, it's not just a local concern, that these projects are important for reliability and for the energy transition and important at the state level and not just at the local level.

And so, now there's a process. It still has to start at the local level, but ultimately, in the cases where there's a moratorium in place, where a township or other local government ultimately says no, where they add restrictions that make it impossible to develop projects, or simply drag their feet and take too much time, there's a process that the developer can then go to the state again for these larger projects that are of statewide significance. And so, I think it's trying to strike a balance between those local concerns and the statewide need for reliable, affordable, and ultimately clean energy.

PIPA: Other states in the Midwest, such as Wisconsin and Minnesota, have similar approaches. Illinois passed similar legislation the year before Michigan did. According to Scripps, Michigan tried to learn from its counterparts' experiences.

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SCRIPPS: This legislation goes further than any other place in terms of how we site energy infrastructure where there's a state role in trying to ensure that the local community still has a seat at the table and a voice in the process.

I think it's really important that communities are part of this process, and I think the legislature has taken steps in this to ensure that they are in a way that they candidly aren't in a lot of our other processes, and that's to the good. I think we've got examples in Huron County, in Gratiot County, and certainly in Isabella County where the projects have moved forward, and the communities have seen firsthand the benefits.

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But we need to make sure that, again, this is something that's done with the community, even if ultimately there is a process at the state level for siting some of these projects of statewide significance.

PIPA: The law tries to balance authorities between localities and the state, and much will depend on how it gets implemented—what those new processes actually look like. But as Sarah Mills reminds me, for people at the local level, support for these types of projects often hinges on economic development much more than these larger policy priorities.

[36:35]

MILLS: When we're talking about large scale, renewable energy projects, so, big wind or solar farms, it's really an economic development proposition to individual landowners and to the communities that host them.

And so, in the case of wind turbines it's some supplemental income. At least in the Midwest, you're not getting super rich off of having wind turbines on your land. And you're able to farm around them. And so, it helps buffer the ups and downs of farming.

On the communitywide side while it varies from state to state in terms of how renewable energy is taxed, most states have some sort of property tax for wind or solar and very often those tax revenues stay in the local government. From place to place, like, which types of services benefit varies. So, in some states the school districts really benefit from wind and solar development. In a real rural community, a wind or solar farm can quintuple the tax base and so can be a real boon.

[music]

In summary, it's really economic development for these communities and the landowners that host the projects.

PIPA: And so, it often comes down to balancing the economic benefits with the various reasons people like about living in their place, as Sarah explained earlier: the natural beauty, the quiet, the openness. And certainly, the farmers I interviewed had their own personal takes on some of the concerns that their neighbors raised. Here are Bob Walton and Paul Gross on the noise, for example.

[38:22]

WALTON: Sure, there's a little noise, but how much noise do our tractors, do our combines, do our choppers put out? Our grain bin right now, we've turned the fans on. You talk about noise. There's noise.

GROSS: We hear so much about noise that they make. And one of the farmers that's on the committee, he said, just go outside, just go outside in the morning and listen. Because in our neighborhood, in our township, there's two sawmills, there's trucking companies. And, you know, if you listen to noise, we don't want to discount the fact that there's noise. But we also want to realize that we live in kind of a noisy world.

PIPA: And there's no denying that wind turbines hundreds of feet tall dotted across the ridgelines in rural communities ... change the view. Paul offers some historical perspective on that.

[39:16]

GROSS: Working in the extension office, we have a bunch of extension reports from the '30s when we had rural electrification, when they first put telephone poles or telephone, electrical poles into the county. Talking to some of the old timers, they said people had a fit when the power lines went up, because it just ruined the view.

PIPA: Bill Chilman, the former school superintendent at Beal City, also heard lots of concerns raised.

[39:44]

CHILMAN: There were other families and a lot of them were it was gonna ruin hunting. They didn't want to look at them. I mentioned earlier, you know, I don't want to look at buildings. I can deal with some windmills off in the distance. I think there were probably some people that were a little ... they might have had one right next door or whatever. I just kind of chuckled sometimes with some of the things that they said. I happen to live next to a farm. Well, the barn's falling down. The cow shit stinks all the time. I don't get to tell that farmer what he should or shouldn't do with his land. I chose to live there. I either live with it or I move. And I like where I live, so I choose to deal with it.

And you know what? I embrace it. When I have my family and friends that come up from the city, I make sure we sit outside, you know, and say welcome to the world. Welcome to where you get your milk and cheese, folks.

PIPA: At the end of the day, however, he returned to first principles: that is, how could this help the school district?

[40:43]

CHILMAN: So, yeah, there was a lot of angst, but again, we non-politicized it and we went mission based. What is our mission? That's the decisions that we have to make. We can't make because feely, touchy, don't want to look at, blah, blah, blah. What is our mission? How is this going to help us achieve it? If it's not going to help us achieve it, we can't support it. This was going to help us achieve it, so we had to support it.

PIPA: And Paul, ever the extension agent, came back to another first principle: that for farmers, they depend upon the land to support their livelihood.

[41:18]

GROSS: And bear in mind that one of the comments that one of the members made was that as landowners you do have landowner rights as well. Because farmers feed their families, they send their kids to school, they put braces on their kids, and they send them to college. And it's revenue based off the land. And that could be growing corn, it can be organic production, it can be feeding cattle, it can be hog operations, it can be dairy, it can be harvesting timber, it can be putting irrigation systems up, oh, and it can also be energy generation, just like we have oil wells in the community.

So, that was something that they thought is, yeah, we understand there's controversies. We also have our livelihoods depend on the resources that are generated from our land.

PIPA: Yet members of the community could go back and forth for a long time with their own points of view based on what was meaningful to them, these farmers included. As Sarah mentioned earlier, it all depends on what you prize about living in your place. As a leadership group, though, as Paul says, they took all these considerations into account and then looked at options to come up with a solution. As Matt Graham says, that meant being fair to everybody.

[42:32]

GRAHAM: We put together a lease where it was equal to everybody. Everybody got their fair share. So, we, we determined that we were going to do an acre payment. So, however many acres you had, everybody got the same amount, same dollar amount per acre. And then we put a price on, okay, if you host a turbine, then you get an amount of money then too. So, it was fair to everybody; everybody was on board. And I don't think we had any farmers that weren't for it.

PIPA: Tracy House, the dairy farmer from Mount Pleasant, helped take the lead on drafting the lease and underscores the community-benefits aspect.

[43:08]

HOUSE: You know in my case we'd had a little work done in oil lease, in leasing. So, I knew that we didn't have to actually go word-for-word with their lease or what they wanted to do, that we could really sit down and ... my goal was to put our lease together. Use somewhat of a template of what they have. And it turned out we were able to come in contact with other wind farms visited other wind farms. And I really

believe that we put a lease together that really fit us. And I think that was very important. And I think we felt very confident in what we put together, that the whole community behind and make it work.

PIPA: The lease provides benefits to homeowners adjacent to the turbines.

HOUSE: I'd like to say within our lease, you know, we had a good neighbor section where if you just had an acre, you receive an annual payment. And at least we tried to pull in the whole community the best we could.

PIPA: Bob Walton, the lifelong farmer and Isabella Township trustee, emphasizes that the lease builds in some other financial safeguards.

[44:27]

WALTON: You know, and people have tried to say these things never pay for themselves. One thing that we were told the first meeting we had with the other wind farm is ask for a bump after 10 years because they're paid for. Well, now I hear they're paid for in eight years. But when we asked for that bump, they never hesitated. Yeah, not a problem. So, that tells me that there's truth to that.

And in anything, it's like, I wonder sometimes when we spend some of the monies we spend on farm equipment, how's this ever going to pay? But it seems to work out. So, there you go. And some of them said, well, they'll quit and they won't fix them. Well, with this lease, that's no big deal. So what if they don't fix them? They still got to pay us. So, they're going to fix them. They're going to make every dollar they can out of these.

And as Matt stated there, we were able to get an ag type lawyer, someone who understood, involved in farming. And we expected that as this bill climbed, we were going to have to go into the checkbook. And Apex kept paying us, paying the lawyer.

[music]

So, it ended up, they paid it all because they now are using that lease because they see the real advantages of that type of lease. And one wind farm told us, okay, you may not get as much money if you got a windmill, but you sure got a lot happier neighbors. And that's a big thing right there. Share.

PIPA: And that idea, sharing the benefits, was the key to building community support to establish the wind farm in Isabella County. Paul Gross underscores this fact.

[46:16]

GROSS: I think the critical part of the lease that was the most important in selling it was the fact that it was a community wind farm. And by community, that if whether you had a turbine or not, if you were signed up, if you were within the project, you got a payment. So, the revenue was spread across not so much on just the turbine, it was spread across the acres as per acre payments. So, all the farmers benefited by it being participating in this wind project. So, I think that's what's unique about the lease we have, and I think it's kind of set a precedent that a lot of the other leases are kind of following in that direction.

I think also the good neighbor payment where folks within the project area that just the homeowners that have an acre and a half two acres or less, if they signed up, they get it they got a thousand dollars an acre a year.

That spreading it across the community, I think, is what was unique about the lease at the time.

PIPA: Albert Jongewaard, who worked with the community members on behalf of Apex Clean Energy, recognizes the unusual and important civic leadership role this group of farmers provided.

[47:24]

JONGEWAARD: I know I'm the guy that was working with the company that came in and we did build the project. And I'm proud of that. But I'm really proud of the community and a lot of the folks I've gotten to know through this process. There's a lot of good people who came together, who worked with one another, who didn't take what I said at face value—you know, trust but verify. It's a close-knit community and a lot of the credit, I think, goes to the farmers who put their neck on the line to be a part of this project.

[music]

I give a lot of credit to the farmers who put their neck on the line and got on board to support this. They supported their neighbors; they supported the county as a whole.

PIPA: And it's paying off. The prospects for continued positive economic impacts from the wind turbines in Isabella County are good. Here's Bill Chilman, the former superintendent of Beal City public schools, describing what it's already meant to the school district.

[48:19]

CHILMAN: The school district is benefiting immensely, along with some of the other municipalities that have voted on millages. We were able to pass a bond in 2016, before the wind park came in. It was just as we were learning about the wind park. We passed the bond issue. It generated about five, five and a half million dollars. We were able to pass a second bond six years later. And that's identical bond, but instead of five raising \$5.5 million in revenue, it raised \$11 million in revenue. And my constituents, my community members aren't paying the other \$5.5 million. DTE is paying that \$5.5 million.

And so, we think we provide a world class education. And we're continually trying to move to get to a world class facility as well that our kids can be educated in. And so again, progress without destroying small rural school, small rural community because of the economic generator, I mean, it's amazing.

PIPA: For Dan Scripps, the chair of the state public service commission, that's a big change.

[49:26]

SCRIPPS: I grew up in in mid-Michigan. I did my elementary school work in Mount Pleasant in Isabella County. And then I went to high school and college actually in Gratiot County, just 15 miles to the south. And I will say, as somebody who grew up during a time where a lot of companies were leaving town, that just before we moved to Alma, Total Petroleum, for example, which operated a refinery there, moved its North American headquarters from Gratiot County to Denver. And I saw a lot of my friends' families struggling.

And to go back today and see investment in those communities where when I lived them in them, you saw a lot of investment moving out of those communities is a pretty dramatic thing. And it's, I think definitely changed the view shed, but it's also changed the economy. And I think provided opportunities that quite simply weren't there when I was growing up.

PIPA: As Paul Gross points out, it's not just been the schools that have benefited. It's been good for the township governments as well.

[50:30]

GROSS: It's been a real economic benefit for the community. A lot of the tax revenues that have come in the spring when they make their payments and pay their property taxes, it's millions of dollars that come into the community for roads, for schools, for operation of county, operation of township.

Well, I think what's interesting is Nottawa Township, the township that I'd lived in, they still operate on one mill. And that's pretty good. And I think having this wind farm in here helps keep those millage rates low. It puts money into the community. And I think long term, it will do that every year as long as the wind farm is producing wind and functioning. So, there's a long-term benefit from it.

I like to throw in, it's far from a benefit, I think a lot of farmers see the wind payments as revenue to help them transition their farm to the next generation.

PIPA: As Tracy House, the dairy farmer in Mount Pleasant, acknowledges, that still doesn't win over everyone.

[51:32]

HOUSE: I think for the most part after it's done, I mean, there's still a few folks in the neighborhood, they don't like them, and I don't think they'll ever will. But I think the general consensus is that it's been very, very profitable and we feel we are helping; this is just another source of energy. And I'm not using any less, so nobody else is and it continues we're going to need more.

PIPA: From Bob Walton's perspective, it's important to situate this project and renewable energy in general into a larger view.

[52:11]

WALTON: Wind and solar is not the total answer. But it's just another tool in the toolbox. Look at how much more is being built, and how much more electricity we need. Windmills have been around forever. And I know these are called turbines, not windmills. But it's the same concept. Do we have some soil damages yet from the construction? Absolutely. But the reimbursement for compaction was pretty darn good. And hopefully, we may end up having to run some more tile strings to get rid of some of this water. But there's so many benefits, not just for us, but for the whole United States. I mean, we've got to produce more electricity.

[music]

If you don't like this, turn your lights off, get your generators, go for it. Be Amish.

PIPA: You know, while it's been several years since the Isabella County wind farm came online and life has moved on, I couldn't help sensing that some of what transpired during those contentious local conversations still lingers. None of the local residents who opposed the wind farm project, for example, would agree to talk to me and participate in this episode.

And as the implementation of the bipartisan infrastructure law and the Inflation Reduction Act provide incentives for more clean energy projects, and as policy commitments to address climate change grow in urgency, rural communities will continue to experience both opportunities and pressures from outside interests swirling around them.

The path forward is not always clear. A wind or solar project won't be a fit for every rural community, but each rural community would ideally have the space and support and even a playbook so that figuring it out is a constructive process. Even among this group of farmers, there were differences of opinion on whether the new law in Michigan, which gives the state greater decisionmaking power on large scale energy projects, is a good thing. Some felt as if it goes overboard and usurps local authority. Others felt that it's probably a necessary step based on their experience of having outsiders come into their community to try to subvert the process. And, in fact, some of those outsiders led a petition drive statewide to put the law up for repeal on the November ballot. It failed.

What this group of public-minded farmers does provide us is a compelling example of the collective civic leadership that exists in rural places but that often goes unrecognized or under-supported or gets caught in the vortex of a larger national political battle. Thanks for giving their story a willing ear and your recognition today.

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PIPA: *Reimagine Rural* is a production of the Brookings Podcast Network. My sincere thanks to all the people who shared their time with me for this episode.

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I'm Tony Pipa, and this is *Reimagine Rural*.

WALTON: To me, they're majestic. It's like when you drive to the UP or to northern Michigan and you crest over that hill and all of a sudden there's the Mackinac Bridge. Wow, is that awesome. And that's the way I kind of feel about the turbines.