

Earba pumped storage hydro scheme meets no formal objections but heavy criticism

by Jamie Wills
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An application to construct the UK's largest pumped storage hydro (PSH) scheme at Lochan na h-Earba east of Roybridge has progressed through Highland Council planning committee without formal objection despite several councillors levelling furious criticism at the project's lack of community benefit.

At a February 6 meeting of the south planning applications committee, councillors agreed that the national importance of the Earba Storage project meant they could not deny the application, but they simultaneously expressed "disgust" at the community benefit offer of 0.5 per cent from applicant Earba Storage, a part of Gilkes Energy.

A "goodwill gesture" made by Earba to improve signs, vegetation clearance, visibility, and laybys on the A86 near the site was also widely condemned, with one councillor saying the scheme was turning the road "from being a goat track to a motorway" and that getting roads upgraded would be the best community benefit.

A Transport Scotland

report saying traffic effects would be insignificant was labelled as "deplorable" and "amateur hour". Additional concerns were raised by councillors at the need to move Arctic char for the 1800 megawatt project, as well as the negative aesthetics of concrete.

Committee chairman Paul Oldham acknowledged the councillors' strong feelings and said concerns would be expressed in its recommended conditions and minutes forwarded to the Energy Consents

'Let's be honest, the Scottish Government are not going to care if we object or not... this is going to go through, our hands are tied.'

Unit (ECU) and Scottish Government ministers, which determine applications for national energy infrastructure projects.

However, he added these actions were "as far as we can go just now".

Councillor Andrew Mackintosh was highly critical of the lack of influence the council has on the project that includes three dams, a powerhouse, aqueducts, and a three

kilometre tunnel.

"Let's be honest, the Scottish Government are not going to care if we object or not - they haven't in the past, they are not likely to now.

"This is going to go through, our hands are tied," Councillor Mackintosh said.

He added that drip feeding applications to obscure larger plans meant the council was being used, and dismissed Earba's supporting community benefit fund brochure (link: <https://earbastorage.co.uk/community-benefit/>) as a

"pathetic little document" that "isn't worth anything".

"We need proper investment in the Highlands.

"We need proper payback for our landscape and communities being pillaged by these big companies for everyone else's benefit but us," he added.

Earba Storage's community benefit offer of 0.5 per cent has been calculated as being worth £12 million, with £6 million paid during the project's five-

year construction stage and the rest split into annual payments across 25 years.

Councillor Ken Gowans described the offer as a "paltry" amount that "will change nothing".

"We need to be serious about this. We are looking at a project that is estimated to bring in £2.4 billion, and I don't think this is showing a great deal of commitment to the community," he said.

The Scottish Government's Good Practice Principles promote community benefits of £5,000 per megawatt per annum for net zero energy developments, but is not compulsory. In December it launched a consultation on the issue, which will run until April 11.

Councillor Bill Lobban said such payments should be made mandatory: "Developers should not be 'open to the

idea'; they should be committed to it. The occasional village hall, Scout hut, and flower baskets are simply not good enough, and the Scottish Government needs to step up and make community benefit compulsory."

For John Fotheringham, chairman of the Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry Community Council, improving the roads should be a priority of the Earba hydro project.

"Having travelled the A86 from Spean Bridge to Kingussie on Thursday, and having had to pull over on the narrow sections to allow two convoys of HGVs to pass safely, I am acutely aware of the deficiencies in a trunk road which is only one and half lanes wide for 17.5 miles east of Moy.

"The A86 from Craig Megaidh to the A899 junction is not fit for purpose presently

and not suitable to host such a massive development, yet Transport Scotland neither commented on it nor suggested an upgrade. They don't care about Lochaber and both the A82 and A86 are a disgrace, but nobody holds these failing public servants to account.

"We really need to alert our communities to dramatically improve the community benefit and get the A86 upgraded."

While local MSP Kate Forbes was unable to comment due to her position in the Scottish Government, MP Angus MacDonald said projects like Earba needed to be more community minded.

Mr MacDonald said: "It is vital that pump storage projects are also subject to community benefit payments. I have met Michael Shanks, the energy minister, and am hoping for some encouraging news on this shortly."

New campsites group gets vocal

Caravan park and campsite owners across the Highlands are going ahead with setting up a new association to be heard loud and clear by decision and policy makers, writes Kathie Griffiths.

Between 34 and 50 site and park owners have given support to the move after a series of scoping meetings, including one in Fort William, were held to get a measure of interest in forming an official group to stand up for themselves and get powers-that-be take notice.

The group's name is still to be finalised, as is its constitution, but the working title so far is Highlands Campsites Association, said Ann Edwards who is behind the push and teamed up with Liz and Darren Redfean - the three have their own sites near Loch Ness and Dornoch.

"We've had good discussions at all the meetings about the Highland Council's own seven-day camping pass scheme for tourists who for £40 can



A Highland Council car park at Golspie, full with overnight stayers despite a campsite being nearby.

use the authority's car parks to stay in overnight and use leisure centre showers for free. The visitor levy was also on the agenda," said Ann.

Four campsites from around the Fort William area were at the February 7 meeting at An Drochaidon. Other meetings were held in Wick, Inverness and Mallaig.

Ann and the Redfeans came up with the idea of the group as a response to increasing challenges the caravan and camping park industry has been subject to over the past few years, with many owners

feeling under-represented when decisions affecting their livelihoods are being made.

Although individually sites might seem insignificant, together they should not be so easily overlooked. The plan is for the new group to make its voice heard, using owners' knowledge and experience to influence those decisions.

The group is working to a tight deadline, asking supporters to make any changes to the draft constitution by February 19 in time for an online public meeting on February 21 where a committee and office bearers will be elected.

There will also be further discussion on the visitor levy and work will be carried out on a group response to meet Highland Council's consultation deadline of March 31.

"It's great we have got so much support. No one at any of our meetings did not agree with the idea of setting up this group and we hope more will join," added Ann.

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