



CLEAN AIR
TASK FORCE

THE POWER OF ENGAGEMENT

Tailwinds of Trust: Isabella Wind



Isabella County,
Michigan

Engagement Overview

Relationship-building, open dialogue, and broad community outreach were central to the engagement strategy behind Michigan’s largest wind project, Isabella Wind. Developed by Apex Clean Energy, the 383 MW project spans 56,000 acres with 136 turbines. While the community initially expressed hesitation around the proposed wind farm, landowners organized themselves, sought out information, and engaged with trusted actors. Apex’s commitment to transparency and public communication helped build trust. During development, six ballot initiatives regarding zoning emerged that could have jeopardized the project—but all were overwhelmingly struck down. A major factor of success was the project’s unique benefit and lease structure: even landowners without a turbine on their property received financial compensation, ensuring equitable distribution of benefits across the community and bringing in more than \$100 million in lease payments over the 30-plus year life of the project.

Project Overview



TECHNOLOGY

Utility-scale wind



CAPACITY

383 MW across 136 turbines



FIRST PROPOSED

2016



IN-SERVICE

2021



DEVELOPER

Apex Clean Energy

About Isabella County

COMMUNITY TYPE

Rural

POPULATION

64,394

EMPLOYMENT RATE

58.1%

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

\$53,759

DEMOGRAPHICS

87.8% white

EDUCATION

92% high school degree, 30% bachelor’s degree or higher

UNIVERSITIES

Central Michigan University

HEALTH

6.6% uninsured

TRIBES

Saginaw Chippewa

KEY INDUSTRIES

Education, recreation services, agriculture, energy generation



Engagement Tactics

Early outreach: Apex approached potential landowners early on through casual conversations, before making an official project announcement. They aimed to build rapport with landowners, prioritizing positive relationships and building a public presence. Several landowners eventually chose to work with Apex over other developers in the region because they felt Apex had their best interests in mind.

Widespread engagement: Apex then engaged the broader community by sending informational postcards on wind energy to all landowners with 40 or more acres, hosting weekly open houses at restaurants, presenting at board meetings, and meeting with local officials, the Michigan State University extension office, and the farm bureau.

Local presence: Apex representatives established a strong local presence by actively integrating into the community, making themselves available to meet often, and attending public events. Demonstrating a deep commitment to the project and its stakeholders, the lead developer even relocated to the community.

Community partnerships: A group of farmers and landowners took it upon themselves to understand what a wind project would mean for their community. They met regularly, traveled to speak with farmers who already had wind installed on their properties, and spoke with attorneys and other experts. They sought out the resources and support needed to make an informed decision.

Partnership with local university: The Michigan State University extension office played a valuable role in the project. The local extension program officer was a longstanding member of the community who mediated conversations, provided technical expertise, and supported landowners in negotiating lease agreements using their prior experience on oil and gas leases in the area.

Trusted actors: Apex brought in third-party experts to give presentations, including a three-star Marine general who presented on the national security benefits of renewable energy, offering multiple perspectives to local community members.

Good neighbor agreement: Locals felt strongly that all neighboring landowners, regardless of property size or whether they hosted a turbine on their land, should benefit from a wind project in their community. The developer offered a “residence payment to neighbors,” signing lease agreements with over 400 families.

Takeaways

It is not just up to the developer to lead or execute on engagement—community engagement can be a dynamic and multi-stakeholder exercise. For Isabella Wind, landowners, elected leaders, trusted community members, the extension program, and third-party experts all played their own role in educating and engaging the community. A process driven by openness and fairness will pay dividends—literally. Isabella Wind’s unique lease framework ensured that landowners and their neighbors benefited financially, mitigating feelings of unfairness and generating broader support for the project.