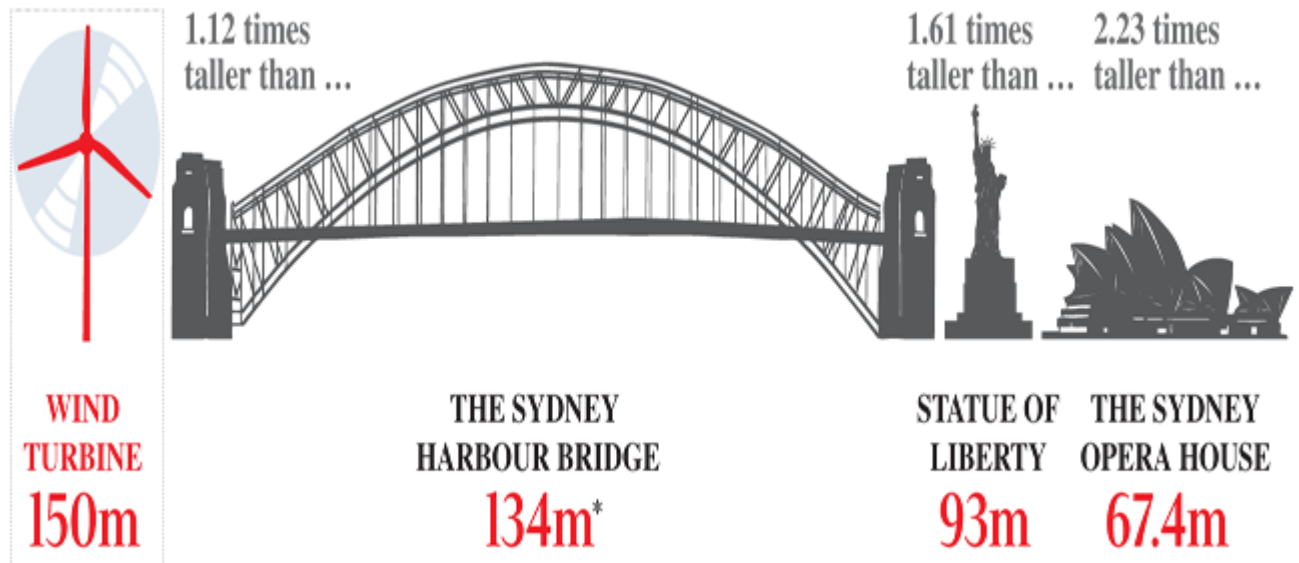


Tycoon Tony Hodgson's tilt at march of turbines

Graham Lloyd, Environment editor,
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RELATIVE HEIGHT OF THE 80 PROPOSED WIND TURBINES AT COLLECTOR, NSW



*Highest point of arch to water level



Tony Hodgson, left, and Rodd Pahl are fighting the construction of 80 wind turbines in their rural NSW community of Collector. Picture: Vanessa Hunter Source: The Australian

ONE of Australia's most successful company receivers is taking on the proponents of a \$400 million wind farm development that plans to place turbines taller than the Sydney Harbour Bridge overlooking his rural getaway on the NSW southern tablelands.

"It started out as a NIMBY (not in my back yard) issue, but it is now much more than that," said Tony Hodgson, who co-founded the insolvency specialist Ferrier Hodgson, which has handled some of Australia's highest-profile corporate collapses, including One.Tel and Laurie Connell's Rothwells Ltd. Ferrier Hodgson also pursued Christopher Skase for his missing millions and more recently was the receiver for the failed logistics group Allco.

Mr Hodgson is no stranger to a protracted fight. He was chairman of the Melbourne Port Authority during the 1998 waterfront dispute between Patrick Ltd and the Maritime Union of Australia.

"My position in life is I thought Genghis Khan was a bit of a piker so I am out there," Mr Hodgson said.

Hodgson bought his property in Collector, about 30km west of Goulburn, five years ago and said he learned of plans for a 160-megawatt, 80-tower wind farm in October.

He has launched a furious campaign against wind farm proponent Transfield Services, the state government and his absentee neighbour, a Double Bay cafe owner who has agreed to host some of the proposed wind towers in exchange for lease payments estimated at \$1m a year for 20 years.

Since Mr Hodgson started his campaign, Transfield has been forced to disclose, belatedly, about \$39,000 in political donations that it failed to report when it lodged its development application.

Mr Hodgson's lawyers have referred Transfield's non-disclosure to the Independent Commission Against Corruption after NSW Planning Minister Tony Kelly declined to do so.

Mr Kelly said he was "satisfied" that Transfield's failure to disclose the donations with its project application on September 17 last year did not indicate "corrupt conduct".

Transfield has rejected any suggestions of impropriety.

Mr Kelly has announced he will not consider the Transfield application -- as is his right under the special project status given to wind farms -- and will instead refer it to the Planning Assessment Commission for assessment.

This has been claimed as a significant victory by those who object to the wind farm proposal.

Meanwhile, lawyers acting for Mr Hodgson have advised his neighbour that the businessman may sue him for loss of amenity and reduced property value if the wind farm goes ahead.

Mr Hodgson has formed a Friends of Collector group to lobby against the development. He has organised a community meeting this weekend at which Sarah Laurie, from the Waubra Foundation, will talk about her research into the health impacts of wind farms on nearby residents.

Opponents of the wind farm are planning to erect a giant billboard alongside the Federal Highway at Collector tomorrow that says "Transfield. Go stick your 80 turbines somewhere else. Try Sydney".

Mr Hodgson said he did not want the Collector wind farm to go ahead but, if it did, Transfield should be forced to make payments to the local community on a dollar-for-dollar basis on what it was paying landholders who had sold the right to host the turbines. He said the company should also be forced to lodge a bond of \$200m to cover the cost of decommissioning the wind turbines at the end of their life.

Opponents want the state government to scrap the Part 3a provisions that give wind farms special project status, and exempt them from normal planning rules and land and environment court oversight.

They also want an inquiry into the environmental and economic value of wind farms and an inquiry into the health impacts of living near them. Transfield's preliminary environmental assessment says there would be a minimum 1km buffer between the wind towers and non-involved residences. The company said it was anticipated that only five non-involved residences would be within 2km of the nearest turbine.

Mr Hodgson said the size of the towers and blades -- at 150m, taller than the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge from the water level -- meant the visual impact was far-reaching.

"My view is there should also be a register of easement that shows up on all the adjoining land," Mr Hodgson said.

"My position would be if I knew there was going to be a wind farm here I would not have bought it five years ago. I could have gone anywhere."

The Collector protests reflect widespread concern in rural communities where wind farms are being proposed.

The wind industry has dismissed concerns it is being self-interested and has research that shows 80 per cent of residents in areas where wind farms have been proposed support the developments. However, a survey of Collector residents who claim they will be immediately affected by the wind towers has produced the opposite result.

Community opposition to wind farms is a global issue.

At a future energy conference in Abu Dhabi this week, Morten Albaek, senior vice-president of Denmark-based wind turbine maker Vestas, said the industry had underestimated the NIMBY syndrome. "The not-in-my-backyard syndrome is strong and driving the political decision-making," Mr Albaek said.

He said he believed the wind industry must provide more information to communities.

"There are too many rumours and conspiracy theories about wind power plants and we as an industry are doing too little to fight them," he said.