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Katelyn Jasmin, University of Michigan

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Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy
University of Michigan

Big Pinwheels in the Sky

By Katelyn Jasmin

Katelyn Jasmin is a Research Assistant at the University of Michigan's Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), where she works on the Center's "Close Up on the U.P." project. She is an undergraduate at U-M's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (class of 2026) and is part of the U.P. Scholars Program, studying English and the Environment through U-M's Program in the Environment (PitE). She is from the Upper Peninsula and is interested in social justice, urban infrastructure planning, civil rights, and climate change policy.

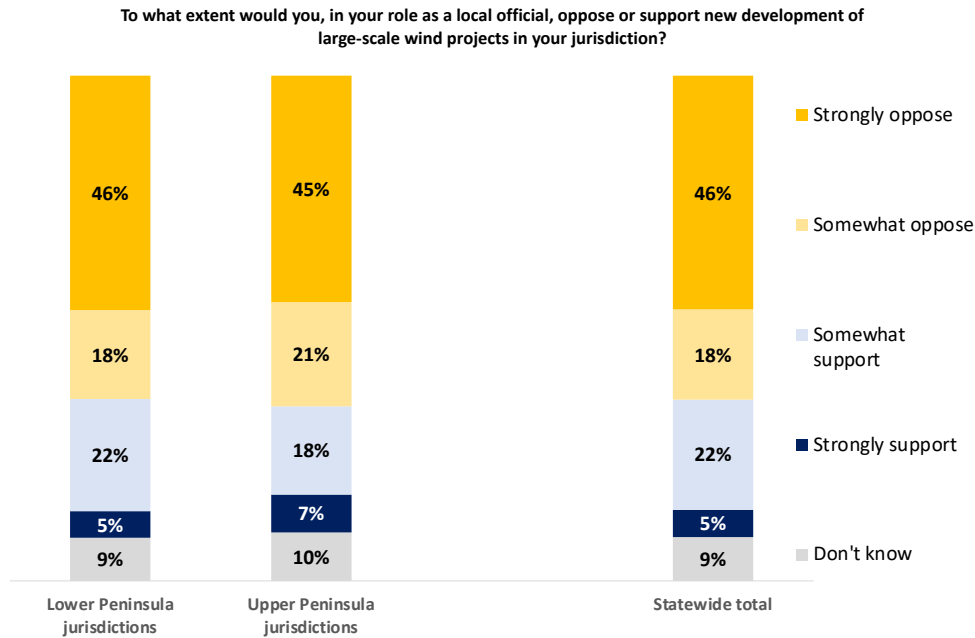
When I was a young child, I saw my first wind turbine in the hills of Iowa when my family was driving from Michigan to Colorado. Many people consider them an eyesore, but I thought they looked absolutely wonderful. They were like giant pinwheels that I thought could fly into the sky at any moment. Soaring through the clouds like an adventurer that doesn't know where they're going, but simply enjoying the journey. Quite a dazzling life to give a wind turbine, isn't it?

The reality of these giants is less fantastical, however. Wind turbines are part of a bigger discussion on renewable energy and sustainability as a whole. There have been discussions in both state and the federal governments if they should be used as an alternative source of energy rather than fossil fuels in order to reduce carbon emissions. In Michigan, though, opinions on this renewable energy source are complex. So, in this article, let's look at the attitudes of Michigan local government leaders, particularly those of the Upper Peninsula, toward wind energy.

In fall 2023, the University of Michigan's Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) conducted a statewide survey on energy issues. According to CLOSUP's survey data, around two-thirds (~66%) of the local officials in U.P. counties, cities, villages, and townships (the respondents of the survey) oppose large scale wind projects in their own jurisdiction (see *Figure 1* below).

Figure 1:

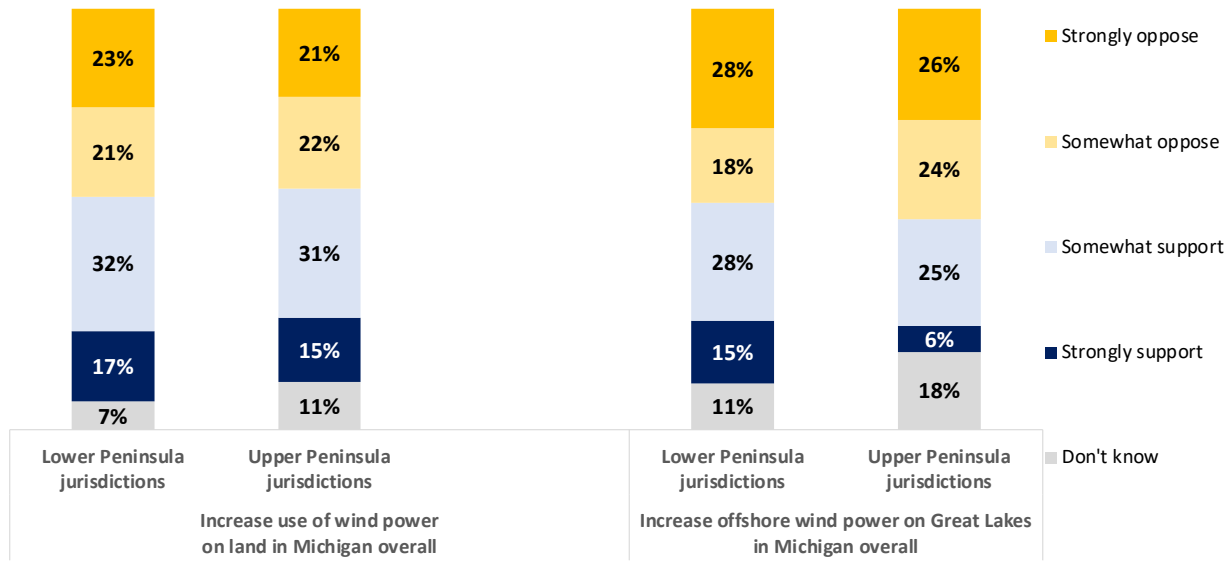
Local leaders' support for or opposition to new development of large-scale wind projects in their own jurisdiction, separated by region (Fall 2023 MPPS)



As for increasing wind energy on land generally across the state, the divide between those who support and oppose it is more evenly split, but still around half of local leaders statewide oppose it. When it comes to increased offshore wind energy on the Great Lakes, there's even less support. The percentages vary, but one commonality is that either "strongly support" or "don't know" is always the lowest.

Figure 2:
Local leaders' support for or opposition to new development of large-scale wind projects across Michigan, separated by region (Fall 2023 MPPS)

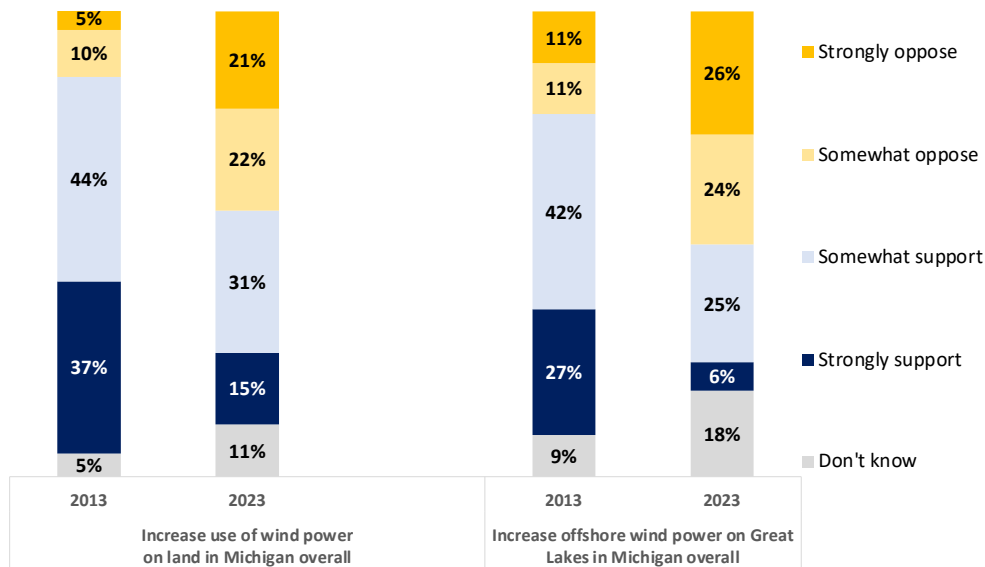
Thinking beyond your own jurisdiction, in general, to what extent do you oppose or support the following possible actions to address energy supply issues in Michigan?



This data is particularly intriguing because there’s such a strong opposition to large wind projects with one’s own jurisdiction, but that strong opposition is halved when it comes to increasing wind energy in the state overall. This may be due to the “Not In My Back Yard” syndrome; people like the idea of developing wind energy, but not where they live. The U.P. officials’ assessments are also interesting because they generally parallel the overall opinions of Lower Peninsula leaders on land-based wind, but when it comes to increasing offshore wind energy, there is less support among local leaders in the U.P. than among those in the Lower Peninsula.

Opposition to wind energy wasn’t always this strong in the state, however. A decade ago, in 2013, CLOSUP conducted a different survey that asked the opinions of local government officials on issues related to wind energy. The results, shown below in *Figure 3*, are surprising when one compares the answers to the 2023 data.

Figure 3:
U.P. local leaders’ support for or opposition to expansion of wind energy across Michigan
 (Fall 2013 vs. Fall 2023 MPPS)



There previously was much more support for wind energy among Michigan officials, including those from the U.P. The support for wind projects within one’s own jurisdiction and expansion of land-based wind energy was much more positive. In both areas, the percentage of those who said ‘strongly oppose’ is a fraction of the amount today. Overall, the majority (81%) of local government officials in the U.P. back in 2013 supported additional land-based wind energy across the state. Today, only 46% support increasing land-based wind energy in the state, and only 31% support expanding off-shore wind.

Historically, U.P. officials had a more enthusiastic attitude about the future prospects of wind energy, which is a stark contrast to many attitudes today. So, we may ask ourselves: well, how did we get here?

For starters, wind energy isn’t the perfect renewable energy option; like all types of energy production, it has its drawbacks. These include visual or noise impacts (this was the biggest discouraging factor for the development of wind energy in 2013 as reported by local officials at the time), negative impacts on local wildlife, lack of efficiency as they can only be placed in areas with consistent wind, and potential environmental impacts (particularly if they’re built offshore). However, there may be a more intricate reason at play here.

Michigan, particularly the Upper Peninsula, is heavily dependent on its tourism industry; for the U.P., it’s a [strong source of economic income](#). As a result, the state spends a lot of time and money

advertising its untold natural gems to the outside world and prioritizes keeping them in optimal condition. What's Michigan's primary golden goose? The Great Lakes! Particularly, the ethereal coastline view. As someone from a Michigan coastal town, I can attest to this from seeing the multitude of hotels blocking said view so that their customers can pay to see it. Given that many people find wind turbines visually unappealing, putting them offshore would impact the picturesque view that many tourists come to Michigan to see. This is especially tricky since the most optimal place to put the turbines is on the coastline, the area with the greatest amount of wind. This may explain why support for offshore wind energy was even lower than land-based wind energy among the U.P. jurisdictions.

There's a tragic irony to this, however. The main reason renewable energy is needed is because our reliance on fossil fuel energy contributes vast amounts to CO2 emissions, which in turn contributes to climate change. As a result of the changing climate, the U.P. and Michigan as a whole is seeing less and less snowfall. Going back to Marquette from Ann Arbor this past winter, I remember there being only two days where it snowed. This is concerning because the U.P. relies not only on summer tourism, but winter tourism as well. With no snow, there was [a devastating hit to winter tourism businesses](#) in the U.P. Not to mention that because of increased temperatures, there's an increased chance of forest fires during the summer, which can lead to health impacts from smoke inhalation. During the [Canada forest fires](#) last summer, the U.P. was covered in smoke and it was hard to breathe when one went outside. No one wants to go outside when they feel like they're going to be poisoned.

Our reliance on tourism is preventing us from making the necessary changes to prevent the worst impacts of climate change...but this lack of change is also what's leading the industry to be strangled.

It's important to consider the deeper aspects of Michigan's change in opinion on wind energy as both the state and the U.S. itself needs to take large measures in order to reach our sustainability goals. The world is at a tipping point with climate change and if the most severe impacts of it are to be prevented, the whole world needs to make the necessary advances in sustainability in order to lower carbon emissions (particularly high-emitting countries like the U.S.). Governor Gretchen Whitmer, for example, has made competing for [additional clean energy projects](#) one of her priorities for her second term. The resistance to develop clean energy projects, like wind energy, in Michigan jurisdictions jeopardizes the state government's sustainability goals. This could cause conflicts between the two levels of government as the State turns to [preemption](#) in order to move clean energy projects

forward. This could also increase tensions between rural and urban communities as most wind energy projects will be in rural areas.

So, what are our next steps?

I want to make it clear that this article isn't advocating for the support or opposition of wind energy. As mentioned before, it's not a perfect option and it might not even be the best one for the U.P or Michigan as a whole. However, the deterioration of support for it over the past 10 years points to a deeper issue of sustainability in Michigan. It's important that we Michiganders question if our reliance on tourism is holding us back from advancing toward a greener, more sustainable future.

In the end, tourism may be more of a detriment for the U.P. than a benefit. Yes, it provides job opportunities and economic income to the region, but the industry is showing the first signs of dying as a result of the onset of climate change. Who knows, in just another ten years, it could be in its grave. Where will that leave the business and people who rely on it? Where will it leave the U.P.?

Not to mention that there's clear negatives of the tourism industry. For one thing, it carves up the communities we hold dear; my friends in Marquette have told me how many of the places they loved growing up were closed down and replaced by hotels for tourists. Another thing is that while local and state governments maintain environmental spaces, they often do so from a financially motivated stance; they mold them into what they think tourists want because at the end of the day tourists are their highest priority, not the local communities or environments.

It's time that we become self-reliant, focusing on growing and improving our communities. We have so much opportunity to expand our horizons and explore avenues that we had never previously dreamed of. Though, it's important that we always think conscientiously while we do this, so that we can build a community where we work with our environment instead of against it. We can't equate progress and development with the sacrifice of the natural environment.

This is the vision I have for Michigan and my U.P. community. I think we truly have the ability to build a better future where we can be free from the confines of industrialization and live in a way that sustains everything and everyone for generations to come. I've always looked at things through a fantastical lens, in which there can be giant pinwheels flying through the sky. Yet, I think this vision is something that can come true if we look at the world around us and grow towards a more sustainable way of living, wind energy or no wind energy.

This article draws on data from statewide surveys of local government leaders from the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS). Since 2009, the University of Michigan's Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) has conducted the MPPS to gather the insights and concerns of elected and appointed officials from all 1,856 of Michigan's general purpose local governments on a wide variety of topics.

The fall 2023 wave received responses from 135 Upper Peninsula jurisdictions. The fall 2013 wave received responses from 142 Upper Peninsula jurisdictions.

CLOSUP staff are available to answer questions and help interpret the data (by email at closup-mpps@umich.edu or by phone at 734-647-4091).

For more information about the MPPS program, see: <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey>. And for more information about U-M's UP Scholars program, see: <https://lsa.umich.edu/scholarships/UPScholars.html>