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Vermonters debate wind energy: Public input is part of the process

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*Searsburg
wind farm,
Vermont,
operating
since 1997*

Our environmental challenges are tractable if they are openly and honestly discussed. A heated topic right now is the 20-turbine wind project installation proposed for the ridgeline known as Grandpa's Knob, which spans the towns of Castleton, Hubbardton, West Rutland and Pittsford.

The developer, Reunion Power, is meeting with stiff opposition from local select boards and some community members. This kind of debate is becoming more familiar across the state as renewable energy technologies and wind power especially are being proposed — and in many cases — installed.

Regardless of any position on this project, a fundamental principle is at stake: the importance of the legal process in any well-functioning society. It is a process that depends on reliable information from all parties, open discussion and informed decisions.

The applicable process in this case is set forth by Section 248 that outlines the procedure by which the Public Service Board issues a "Certificate of Public Good" with regard to utility projects.

The Public Service Board is a quasi-judicial board that supervises the rates, quality of service and overall financial management of Vermont's public utilities. The PSB must review the developer's plans for the project and consider input from other parties, including the Agency of Natural Resources and members of the public.

This review process was the topic of an informational meeting sponsored by the Rutland Regional Planning Commission at the Rutland Intermediate School on June 30. As that meeting made clear, public input is an integral part of the review. The process is only as comprehensive as the various parties make it. The complex framework of a land-use decision such as this must rest on a solid foundation of information that spans local issues in the context of Vermont's patterns of energy uses and energy sources. The final decision is made only after all that information has been reviewed.

Input from a well-informed public, therefore, is crucial to the quality of the final decision. This requires us to develop our understanding of the state's energy and environmental challenges as well as our appreciation of local concerns.

Electricity consumption accounts for about one-third of Vermont's total energy use, after transportation and heating. The state has enjoyed relatively stable electricity prices over the last 20 years, much of it provided by

Vermont Yankee. But this year Vermont utilities are expected to end purchases from Vermont Yankee as they continue to transition to new long-term contracts with Hydro Quebec and others.

Most Vermonters agree that it's important to develop local power resources. And most recognize that we must find alternatives to burning fossil fuels because of their adverse impact on our environment. The importance of energy efficiency is likewise well understood.

Beyond this point, positions diverge. The parties have different concerns: environmental, economic, political and social. Despite these various perspectives, the glaring question remains: How can we as a society respond to the sober reality of climate warming?

Vermonters are having this conversation, in many contexts. What role do the various renewable energy technologies have to play in the state's future? How can our biomass resources be properly managed? Are large-scale wind turbines appropriate on our ridgelines? What about small-scale hydro power? And are we focusing enough attention on simple, energy-saving measures such as upgrading our aging housing stock?

No question arouses as much debate as the issue of large-scale wind installations. Some see them as a valuable economic resource and a symbol of hope as we make the great transition away from a fossil fuel economy which is devastating Earth's ecosystems. Others regard them as an insult to our ridgelines; one that threatens a unique and irreplaceable resource that is part of our identity as the Green Mountain State.

The proposed \$100-million Grandpa's Knob wind installation has already been opposed by officials in the towns of Castleton, Hubbardton, West Rutland and Pittsford. The Agency of Natural Resources has expressed reservations about the project.

But, as John Burke of the Public Service Board explained at the June 30 informational meeting, that does not stop the developer from seeking approval from the PSB. "They have every right do so," Burke said.

Reunion Power has not yet filed any application for a Certificate of Public Good with the PSB.

Steve Eisenberg, managing director of Reunion Power, says, "All we ask is the opportunity to present our project and for all stakeholders to keep an open mind until a site plan is on the table. Many of those who are against wind power and the project are working with misinformation. The true impacts and the facts will speak for themselves."

As Vermont moves forward with renewable energy, many complex and often conflicting issues are emerging. Vermont has large wind-power resources; although, many potential sites cannot readily be connected to the power grid. The state lacks an overarching policy on wind project development and location. Under the present system, the PSB addresses the pros and cons of each unique location on a case-by-case basis.

Some of the most significant issues at this juncture are: How can we best educate ourselves so we are contributing to a comprehensive review of these projects? If local opposition preempts PSB review, are we denying ourselves an important opportunity to develop our collective understanding of the complex issues involved? And in the long-term, how can we best prepare ourselves to deal with the challenges of crafting Vermont's energy future?

Vermont Public Service Board Section 248 Process: <http://psb.vermont.gov/statutesrulesandguidelines/>