



August 23, 2010
Massachusetts

Some wind advocates are now foes; Disruption issues have turned off onetime fans

Associated Press, www.boston.com 23 August 2010

Bob Anders used to count himself among the fans of wind power — until developers pitched the idea of a 10-turbine wind farm near his Webster home with blades reaching close to 500 feet in the air.

That's when Anders began having second thoughts about the disruption, from the constant whooshing of the turbines to the repetitive glint of sunshine off the blades at certain times of the day, not to mention a feared drop in property values.

"I've dedicated the past two or three months of my life to reading about this and I haven't found anything good," Anders said. "It's a major impact on our neighborhood."

While the massive 130-turbine Cape Wind project in Nantucket Sound has battled lawsuits and jumped through permitting hoops for nearly a decade, the nation's first planned offshore wind farm isn't the only wind energy project in Massachusetts facing irked neighbors.

In the Western Massachusetts town of Monroe, foes of a proposed 20-turbine wind power project fought for six years, all the way to the state Supreme Judicial Court, to block the 30-megawatt Hoosac Wind project. The court last month allowed the project to move forward.

In Brimfield, wind developers are working to convince neighbors about a plan to install wind farm of eight to 10 turbines. And in Webster, Anders and some of the 70 or so other homeowners near the wind farm are planning to hire their own acoustic engineers. One complicating factor is that the project is just across the town line in Douglas.

The opposition of Anders and others is posing a threat to Governor Deval Patrick's goal of generating 2,000 megawatts of wind power in Massachusetts by the year 2020 — an effort that could require the installation of up to 3,000 turbines, the bulk of them on land.

Although the installation of onshore wind turbines has picked up dramatically, that goal is still daunting. There have been just 22 turbines installed since 2001, with 140 more in the pipeline.

To help pick up the pace, Patrick pushed a bill he said would streamline the permitting process. That bill got within a final vote in the Senate before the clock ran out on the Legislature's formal session on July 31.

"The wind siting bill is enormously important," Patrick said Friday. "We have to get serious about moving to alternatives."

But the bill's critics say it undermines local control and would make it easier for developers to push through unpopular projects.

Eleanor Tillinghast of the environmental advocacy group Green Berkshires said she, too, used to be a fan of wind power, but now believes the amount of energy produced isn't worth the trade-off in noise, disruption, and commercial development of green areas.

"We are not going to be changing our energy profile in New England with 1,000 wind turbines, but we are going to be destroying our environment," she said.

"If we are talking about sacrificing all our mountaintops for 5-6 percent of our energy needs, that's not acceptable."

She said that while the industrial, multiturbine projects pose some of the greatest threats to the environment, even one- and two-turbine community-based projects can disrupt neighborhoods.

First Wind, a Boston-based wind energy developer, is one of the companies riding the push for renewable electricity sources.

The company is hoping to build up to 10 turbines in Brimfield, although the project is still in the planning phase. The company has scheduled a community meeting today and will go before a public hearing in September.

Company spokesman John Lamontagne acknowledged that turbines emit some sound, but said a well-sited project would minimize that effect. He also said that in Brimfield, developers would rely on existing logging roads, although they would have to be widened.

He also said there are benefits to local communities, including tax revenues and potential jobs. He said the Brimfield project could end up producing up to 20-25 megawatts, roughly enough energy for about 10,000 homes.

"That's clean, renewable power that doesn't emit junk into the air," he said. "Would folks rather have a coal plant in their backyard?"

Ian Bowles, Massachusetts secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs, said the state needs to push ahead on all renewable energy fronts, from solar to wind, including onshore projects.

He said the wind energy siting bill, which supporters still hope they can pass during the informal session, would go a long way to speeding that process by setting statewide standards on where projects could be sited, including requirements they be set back from homes and not infringe on the habitats of endangered species.

The bill would also for the first time allow local communities to charge developers for the cost of hiring their own technical experts to review permit applications, he said.

"It would take a lot of those objective arguments off the table," Bowles said. "The legislation in no way undercuts local authority."