

Wind project raises issues

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ROXBURY - The Record Hill wind project continues to divide residents and raise questions about the role of wind as an alternative energy source in Maine.

"Wind turbines do not belong in Maine's mountains, period," Steve Thurston wrote in an e-mail. Thurston, a private contractor and Vermont resident, owns property near Roxbury Pond in the vicinity of where the turbines will be sited pending Maine Department of Environmental Protection approval.

"Turbines provide short-term employment for a handful of specialized contractors, none of whom are local, so any benefit to the local economy will be a flash in the pan," he wrote.

Some property owners near the project site are fearful of the noise and visual impact. Thurston, who has extensively researched noise effects from turbines, noted that noise should be measured on a line source basis to achieve an accurate reading. He took issue with the point source method, claiming that the Record Hill developers and their noise consultant were using this to make it easier to get a permit.

"The only reason for developers and their consultants to ignore these basic requirements of their profession is that they prefer to get permits rather than protect communities from undue noise," Thurston said. "Setbacks alone are not enough. Terrain and wind characteristics play a major role in the attenuation of low-frequency turbine noise."

Angus King, a principal in the Roxbury wind project, defended the method used to measure the wind noise impacts.

"We used conservative assumptions," he said. "We assumed everyone was downwind at all times, and there was maximum sound output at all times."

King noted that the sound output was based on field testing and a sophisticated sound model.

"The DEP doesn't just take the applicant's word for granted," he said.

John Sutton, chairman of the Roxbury Board of Selectmen, noted that the project will reduce property taxes for the community and credited the developers for not asking for tax increment financing. He noted they have also made an offer to pay the first 500 kilowatt hours of the generation cost of every resident's electrical bill.

The developers, Sutton said, have been "exemplary" in providing information to residents, holding and attending meetings, and taking questions and concerns into account. The town narrowly approved the project in a vote taken this past winter, but some residents are calling for a re-vote based on new evidence that has come out about wind power since then.

Sutton refused to speculate on the possibility of a re-vote. As for the evidence in question, he observed that several residents had approached him and he encouraged them to present the findings to the DEP.

Thurston, however, observed that state agencies may be expediting the process for developers. He pointed to the Mars Hill wind project, where a variance was issued even though turbine noise exceeded the variance limit. Also, Thurston said, a wind power bill, LD 2283, "spent only 15 days in the Legislature, and suspension of the rules was used every step of the way to expedite its passage without giving the Legislature adequate time to hold hearings and study the implications."

Additionally, Thurston explained that the Maine Medical Association has taken turbine effects on human health very seriously and has formed a subcommittee to study the issue. He took exception to the assessment of Dr. Dora Mills, director of Maine's Bureau of Health, who equated wind turbines with being no louder than a refrigerator and no more than "an annoyance."

"It is clear to me that driving by a wind turbine array, or stopping for a brief look and listen, does not translate to the experience of living near them," Thurston pointed out.

He added that turbine noise is mostly a nighttime problem, with numerous documented instances of sleep deprivation and other health issues caused by constant turbine noise.

King emphatically stated that the MMA has not taken a position on wind turbine noise, and that two doctors, not the MMA itself, had raised the possible turbine impacts. He added that Independence Wind has prepared visual overlays comparing the vicinity of the Record Hill Wind project to homes in the area with the Mars Hill project. In the case of Mars Hill, King said, houses are within 2,000 feet of the turbines, whereas the closest Roxbury residence is 3,100 feet away.

"We've said all along the view is going to change," King said. "The guy who's lived on the pond for 50 years may hate it."

The visual impact, King explained, is subjective and there will be side effects regardless of the type of energy that is generated.

Thurston is in favor of developing offshore wind in Maine, noting that 95 percent of the state's wind resources lie offshore. However, he pointed out, the cost of developing

wind power versus the feasibility of other forms of alternative energy and energy conservation makes wind energy less viable.

"Remote mountain top wind farms require massive transmission infrastructure to get the electricity to the population centers," Thurston said. "There may come a time when offshore wind-generated electricity competes with other forms of generation without the need for the massive subsidies that are required today to make wind generation a viable investment for developers."

He added that he supports energy conservation and would support subsidies for families to take such measures. These methods, Thurston said, could include insulation, more efficient heating equipment, storm windows or more fuel-efficient vehicles for homes and businesses.

While King supports solar, biomass, hydroelectric energy and conservation measures, he is adamant about having wind power as a crucial piece of the puzzle. Reducing the state's dependence on fossil fuels and having Maine be a leader in the alternative energy movement is also critical, he said.

"We need solutions in the next two or three years instead of the next decade," King said. "Wind is one of the resources we have. There is no single answer."