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One for All

Nine East Bay communities band together to get energized

By Tim Faulkner



Rhode Island's East Bay is looking, once again, to become a pioneer in wind energy. As home to the state's first two commercial-scale wind turbines, both in Portsmouth, the region is being considered for a cluster of turbines in one of nine communities stretching from East Providence to Newport and Little Compton.

Orchestrated by the East Bay Energy Consortium, a volunteer committee of municipal planners, elected officials and renewable energy advocates from seven towns and two cities, the project has quietly moved forward as the state's first land-based wind farm.

Relying on a strength-in-numbers approach, the EBEC wind project aims to harness one of the region's limitless natural resources by constructing up to 10 wind turbines in a single location. If all goes as planned, East Bay communities will share the design and building costs while minimizing residential and environmental side effects, all in return for a taking a step toward energy independence and a new source of municipal revenue.

In a recent draft proposal, the multi-turbine project is also being coupled with the development of a business park. The venture aims to encourage economic growth on top of the added income the city or town earns for shouldering the turbines. State officials are endorsing the rare show of regional cooperation as a model for other communities to follow, helping to bring down costs while sharing resources.

The Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation and other groups have showed their support for the regional concept by funding initial studies for the East Bay wind project. "The governor's energy office has been helpful," says Newport Mayor Jeanne Marie Napolitano, chairwoman of the EBEC. "They're working with us. You usually don't get that much cooperation."

Julian Dash, Director of the EDC's Renewable Energy Fund, likes the regional wind farm concept because it saves all parties time and money with planning and permitting while eliminating several "sporadic" and possibly competing turbine proposals. "It helps nine cities and towns at a time instead of one or two," says Dash, a regular attendee at the monthly EBEC meetings held at Roger Williams University in Bristol.

The East Bay planning group got its start two years ago during a leadership seminar hosted by the university's public policy institute. "The institute was trying to find a way that the university with its resources could work with the nine East Bay communities, to help them

improve their municipal services in a time of scarce resources," says Barrington Town Council President June Speakman, an EBEC representative and former member of the Roger Williams public policy program at the school, where she teaches political science.

The Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation funded the initial studies to determine if the project was "technically and organizationally possible," Speakman says. "And that's what the East Bay Energy Consortium has been exploring."

From the outset, the goal has been to save money rather than build a "green" project, she insists. "It was less about wind than it was multi-town collaboration," Speakman explains. "So it's a very healthy development that we're learning to work together and share solutions and create better government." It's an approach, she predicts, other communities will copy. "It will stay and we'll use it to work on other issues."

Paying for Wind

Unlike the proposed offshore Deepwater Wind project in Block Island Sound, the EBEC will forgo working with an outside developer and instead look to state and federal funds, grants, electricity surcharges and municipal bond offerings to fund the \$50 to \$55 million project. If the numbers add up, the cost to each city and town is expected to be offset with revenue from the wind-generated electricity. The locally produced wind energy could satisfy energy needs at public buildings, or be sold back to the power grid for a profit while cutting the size of municipal electric bills. The community hosting the windmills is also expected to see revenue through lease payments on the land where the towers are constructed.

The Renewable Energy Fund has already provided \$100,000 of the seed money for a feasibility study. The Rhode Island Foundation, meanwhile, also contributed \$40,000 to cover startup costs. Each community in the consortium has also paid \$2,000 to help with technical matters and map out all phases of the project. Thorough research is essential to the project's survival, says Napolitano, "So that we could actually operate at a profit from year one."

So far, the initial study suggests an annual payoff of up to \$212,000 to each community during the first 20 years. The payback could continue for at least another three or four decades over the life of the turbines, says Gary Gump, a Portsmouth representative on the EBEC.

"The results in every period show we're positive every year," he notes.

If the East Bay wind project is to move beyond the concept stage, Speakman says, the further studies must show that revenue from the wind-generated electricity will be enough gain public support for the multimillion-dollar project. "That's a huge amount of money," admits Speakman. "Any time you use public money you need significant payoff. The case has to be made to the nine town councils that this makes sense financially. If it's taxpayer dollars you need big wind."

Finding the Perfect Site

After conducting wind studies in each community, the EBEC is looking closely at Tiverton's dormant business park and two adjoining parcels for a joint wind farm and industrial center.

A draft of the most recent study recommends the 180-acre site as a tentative but ideal location for up to 10 turbines situated within a revamped business district. Without officially endorsing the location, the EBEC is moving forward with it, spending \$15,000 for the installation of a tower for measuring wind speed. Building permits are also being sought in case the studies conclude the project is ultimately profitable.

Up to 10 2.5-megawatt (or higher) turbines bunched in groups of two or three could be built within the business park and surrounding area, the report finds, with each tower reaching a height between 260 and 330 feet to the center of the rotor. By comparison, the single 1.5-megawatt turbine at Portsmouth High School stands at 220 feet to the center rotor and 320 feet fully extended. Tiverton officials, so far, seem receptive to the wind and business development enterprise.

Tiverton Town Planner Chris Spencer likes that the project will invigorate the stalled business park, a site dormant for most of its 25 years. Although various commercial groups have sought to develop the area around one or two large tenants, only in the last year has the town assumed full control of the business district. With the prospect of wind turbines and funds for beefing up infrastructure, Spencer hopes to attract several stand-alone businesses, such as boat builders and other small- to mid-sized manufacturers. "I think it's the right area for it," he says. "It's not in a residential area or an open space. It's an industrial area. Certainly in the industrial park it's a win-win."

The Newport County Chamber of Commerce may



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also direct \$80,000 in federal funds to pay for road and utility upgrades as well as a master plan of the 494-acre business park. The state, through assistance from RIEDC, is backing the dual-purpose development, Spencer says. but, "It's all in the early stage; there is nothing formal before the town at the this point."

Most importantly, residents will get their say. "I don't know where the community is at this point, but as far as the site goes this is one of the better areas," Spencer says. "We're doing some planning regardless."

Community Outreach

The EBEC promises to go forward with a strong public outreach program but early has been wary of media attention and the anticipated public uncertainty that has stalled other wind turbine projects. So far, the tight-lipped policy has worked in favor of the project, as most advocacy groups, even those opposed to large-scale public spending, aren't aware of the proposal.

Planners admit, however, the skeptics will eventually surface. Speakman says she has learned valuable lessons from a proposed Barrington-based turbine that was defeated in 2008. As a town councilor, Speakman admits she was "bruised" by the long and contentious debate over plans for a single turbine. The project, she says, sparked "very intense" debate over wildlife destruction, noise and even psychological issues. The project was eventually turned down over a lack of wind, but "It has caused me to be cautious of these proposals," Speakman says.

The Portsmouth High School turbine, however, encountered little public opposition. In 2007, residents overwhelmingly passed a \$3 million bond referendum, capturing 65 percent of the vote. "Because we tried to be as forthcoming as we could I think we garnered a lot of trust from the community," says Gump, president of the town's sustainable energy committee and planner for the high school turbine. Voters liked the project because residents were familiar with the Portsmouth Abbey

Ten turbines may be a tough sell. Even if the revenue estimates are favorable, the committee has nine communities to convince.

turbine and a wind study provided a strong case for a return on investment, Gump says. "There was little risk at no cost to the town," he notes.

Since going live March 24, 2009 the turbine has exceeded financial projections. In its first year of operation the 220-foot, 1.5-megawatt turbine topped its revenue estimates by 10 percent, says Portsmouth Assistant Town Planner Gary Crosby, who oversees operation for the turbine. After paying down debt and expenses, an extra \$175,000 was divided up this year between the school department and the town's operating budget. "It's making money," says Crosby. "We couldn't be more pleased."

Time to Act

Despite this past success, ten larger turbines may still be a tougher sell a few miles up Route 24 in Tiverton. Even if the revenue estimates are favorable in the eyes of the EBEC, the committee has nine communities to convince, including the town hosting the wind turbines. "The residents of Tiverton need to be made comfortable that they are getting a good deal for their community," Speakman concedes.

Dash stressed that the first hearings will be held in the coming weeks through a full-fledged public awareness program. "[This project] is not something that's going to be done in a vacuum," he declares.

"We're totally open. We want to receive your comments and we want you to understand we are all working together," Napolitano says. "There will be objections," she admits. So, "we want to do it right."

That's why she's proceeding cautiously. "We're really serious about what we're doing and we want to put our best foot forward." But with the full support from committee members and the money available to do something significant, Napolitano says it's time to act. "There are very few organizations that are working on a regional projects," she says, adding, "Right now I feel we're on the right track." □