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One for All: Nine East Bay Communities Band Together to Get Energized

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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 strengths-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 gains for shouldnering 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 “scorched 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 helpful 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.”

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 $10,000 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 250 and 330 feet to the center of the rotor. By comparison, the single 1.3-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 staid 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
also direct $30,000 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 RIECD, is backing the dual-purpose development, Spencer says, but, "It's all in the early stage; there is nothing formal before the town at 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. Speaksman says she has learned valuable lessons from a proposed Barrington-based turbine that was defeated in 2008. As a town councilor, Speaksman admits she was "bashed" 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," Speaksman 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. "We were presented with 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.

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**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," Speaksman 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," Napoliotano 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 the do something significant, Napoliotano 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.\"