

RUTLAND HERALD - **The Erosion of Environmental Protection**

SANDY WILBUR - Published: November 3, 2010

At the recent Renewable Energy Vermont conference, the question was raised: If polls show Vermonters want wind energy, then why is it so difficult to build? The answer lies in the differences between theory and reality.

For over 15 years, the industrial wind industry has been “setting the table” in Vermont, supporting advocacy groups VPIRG and CLF, supporting candidates that support their position, “helping” legislators draft policy changes that make it easier for their projects to get permitted. To put out the

welcome mat to industrial wind, policies were created that ensured “tax certainty” (paying almost no property taxes), expediting permitting for large wind measurement towers, creating more incentives or mandates for utilities to buy renewable generation regardless of cost, and allowing wind developers to get a certificate of public good without having to specify the make or size of turbines.

But still the wind industry has wanted more. They are persuading legislators to encourage utilities to generate their own wind power (as Green Mountain Power is doing in Lowell) so they can recover their costs through customers’ rates and ensure higher rates of return on owned generation, and to change the appeals process by bypassing the environmental court.

Moreover, the industry, along with the politicians that work with them, has come up with a “winning strategy” for getting more projects sited in Vermont.

Robert Dostis, previous chairman of the House Natural Resources and Energy Committee and now working for GMP, said that what “worked” in Lowell can work elsewhere:

Hire two well-respected members of a community to be their “eyes and ears” on the ground, reporting back gossip, rumors, and opposition.

Then offer a sum of money to the town that will be hard to refuse, offer to go away if the town votes “no” on the project, and offer a token amount to neighboring communities (where impacts might even be greater). Take people on a public relations tour of a wind project during the day (when noise is less a problem) while launching a huge PR effort to win voter support for the project.

What’s wrong with this picture? What happened to government leadership? The public good? Vermont’s landmark environmental protections are being systematically eroded by a well-entrenched special interest group that excels at public relations and lobbying. While the public assumed this was a great “green” idea some years ago, or that you needed industrial wind to replace Vermont Yankee, citizens who’ve researched the issues themselves are now keenly aware of noise and low frequency vibration problems and the

destruction to fragile high elevation land, water, and wildlife.

Every time legislators enact more streamlining efforts to benefit this special interest group, the less concerned citizens and concerned environmentalists are heard. But as citizens learn more, they're saying "no thank you" when the theory starts to become a reality in their communities.

That is something no poll will capture. It's not a phone call from a stranger asking you to press 1 or 2 on your phone — it's the future of our communities, our mountains, our energy networks, our state. Educated citizens are asking questions. Too bad they are being treated as the problem.

Just like BP's compromised relationship with the federal agency responsible for regulating it in order to promote energy development in ecologically sensitive areas, so too the wind energy developers have been very cozy with government policymakers in order to develop energy in environmentally sensitive areas. Clearly some government policymakers prefer to direct funds to these corporations (and/or join them) than to give that same money to communities and individuals to, for instance, insulate their homes. Now that would actually help reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Sandy Wilbur is a co-founder of the Vermont Energy Conservancy and lives in South Londonderry.

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