

# Lowell wind project puts three communities at odds

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The town of Lowell enthusiastically supports a proposed \$150 million commercial wind energy project on the ridgeline of Lowell Mountain as "environmentally sound energy."

In next-door Albany, the Selectboard "actively opposes" Kingdom Community Wind, citing concerns about noise, health, aesthetics and stream flow.

In Craftsbury, the Selectboard endorses the objections of the town Conservation Commission: that the project will damage the area's natural heritage, a heritage "at the core of our sense of place and our community identity" without providing "stable, low-cost power."

The fate of Kingdom Community Wind lies in the state's hands. The Public Service Board has concluded hearings on the project proposed by Green Mountain Power Corp. and Vermont Electric Cooperative and is expected to rule in the coming months.

But the recent objections to the wind farm by the towns of Albany and Craftsbury raise anew the question: Why does one community embrace a commercial wind project, while some of its neighbors arrive at strong objections?

## Demographics by town

	Lowell	Albany	Craftsbury
2010 pop	879	941	1,206
*2009 median income	\$23,583	\$25,283	\$28,430
Equalized grand list	\$772,990	\$864,670	\$1,338,720
Native (VT-born)	78%	64%	62%
% college graduates	13%	19%	31%
Poverty level	13%	19%	9%

*\*Median adjusted gross income per tax return*

*Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Vermont Tax Department*

The answer lies in the blend of dollars and demographics, geography and geology, politics and personal values that appear to drive the local debate each time a utility-scale wind project is proposed on Vermont mountaintops.

Kingdom Community Wind would install a line of 20 or 21 towers along the undeveloped ridge of Lowell Mountain, a north-south range of hills located east and roughly parallel to the main spine of the Green Mountains.

The project would produce up to 63 megawatts of power when running full tilt. Because the wind is erratic, production each year would be about 30 percent of the full capacity.

Green Mountain Power said the project would fill 6 to 8 percent of its generation need, and 4 percent of generation for Vermont Electric Co-op customers.

The turbine blades would rise more than 400 feet above the ground along three miles of ridgeline, where clearing for the service road and turbine pads would be wider in places than Interstate 89.

By the chances of geography and 18th-century boundary-drawing, Lowell Mountain lies along the town's eastern edge, closer to sections of Albany and northwestern Craftsbury than to parts of Lowell. (Other neighboring towns, including Eden and Irasburg, have not taken a position on Kingdom Community Wind.)

Just east of Lowell, the Green Mountains give way to a softer, more open landscape known as the Northern Vermont Piedmont. In contrast to the largely forested steep slopes and deep valleys of Lowell, Albany and Craftsbury share the broad Black River Valley and a landscape that includes farm fields with picture-postcard views to the Lowell Mountain ridge.

### **'Show me the money'**

Seventy-five percent of Lowell's voters endorsed Kingdom Community Wind on Town Meeting Day 2010.

Ask opponents of the wind project in Craftsbury and Albany about this overwhelming show of support, and they offer the following analysis: "It's called 'show me the money,'" said Jim Moffat, a 73-year-old Craftsbury tree farmer.

Before the Lowell vote, Selectboard members negotiated an agreement with Green Mountain Power in which the utility promised to pay the town at least \$400,000 a year and likely closer to \$535,000 a year for 25 years, depending on the size of the project.

Even the smallest probable payment would be more than enough to eliminate Lowell's municipal tax of 51 cents per \$100 of assessed property value, a tax that raised \$418,000 in 2010. (Lowell voters will decide how to use the money, and could choose to save some of the utilities' payments rather than reducing the tax rate to zero.)

"You tell people 'This will pay all your town taxes,' and of course they are going to say yes," said Mike Nelson of Albany, an opponent of Kingdom Community Wind who helped his Selectboard collect information about the wind farm.

### **Some Lowell residents strongly disagree.**

"We were in favor of this when it first came up seven years ago, before we knew it was going to be this kind of money," said Pam Tetreault, Lowell's town treasurer. "It was not about the money. It was about clean energy."

Lowell Selectboard member Alden Warner, a backer of the wind project, said he believes the town would have supported the wind farm even if the utility payments were much smaller, but he acknowledged, "I don't think the vote would have been as strong."

On the day it filed papers seeking Public Service Board approval, Green Mountain Power also announced creation of a Good Neighbor Fund to make smaller payments to five neighboring towns each year for a decade. Albany would receive the largest sum, \$54,000. The utility described the fund as a way to provide "direct economic benefits" beyond Lowell's borders.

Albany and Craftsbury selectboard members described the payments as not significant. "I don't think \$50,000 to Albany is any kind of appropriate," said Selectboard member Frank Coulter. Selectboard member Chris Jacobs added, "But I don't think we'd send it back."

### **In Albany, practical worries**

If money set the stage for approval in Lowell — and the absence of significant payments opened the door to skepticism in Albany and Craftsbury — the choices made by each community cannot be attributed to money alone.

In all three communities there are residents who support wind power for its renewable, low-carbon attributes, and residents who oppose mountaintop wind projects because of habitat destruction, aesthetics and fear of noise pollution, health effects and diminished property values.

Albany residents voted in May 2010 to participate in Public Service Board hearings but not to oppose the project. Selectboard members said they decided to take an official position against the wind development in March, after PSB hearings concluded, based on

research done since the town meeting.

Although separated by a mountain, Lowell and Albany share common characteristics. Albany is a bit larger, but, as in Lowell, most people work out of town or make a modest living in the building or auto trades. Poverty levels in both towns top 10 percent.

The traditional Vermont belief in private property rights — Albany has no zoning ordinance — made some Albany residents reluctant to object to Lowell's choice to have its ridgeline developed. Two of the three Selectboard members started out in favor of Kingdom Community Wind, Coulter said. They decided to write a letter of opposition last month based on practical concerns about potential measurable effects on the community and its residents, Coulter and Jacobs said.

Those concerns range from a conviction that noise from the turbines would force nearby householders to sleep with their windows closed at night, to a worry that construction atop the mountain would disrupt water flow to the brook that feeds the town fire hydrant.

Homes with a view of Lowell Mountain have higher property values and pay higher taxes in Albany, the Selectboard members said. Their letter to the Public Service board noted that a property owner in another town has gone to court seeking an 8 percent reduction in his assessed property value because a wind turbine has been erected on nearby land.

"Displacement of taxes from residents who have been directly impacted by the project to those who have not been directly impacted is unfair," they wrote, nor should the town be forced to spend money defending itself in property tax cases triggered by wind development.

### **'Our sense of place'**

Craftsbury has never held a town vote on Kingdom Community Wind. In two informal, unscientific surveys opponents outnumbered supporters,

But unlike Albany, Craftsbury is a markedly different place than Lowell, and those differences helped shape the town's response to the wind project.

Lowell's prosperity once was built on the asbestos mine on Belvidere Mountain. The mine employed many town residents and paid half the town's property taxes. Its closing in the early 1990s was thus a double blow and left the town without a strong economic base.

Craftsbury's prosperity also was built on its landscape but has proved more durable. Farms thrived in the fertile Black River Valley and the gentle hills above it; a dozen remain despite the precipitate decline of dairy farm numbers in Vermont.

That landscape, with its panoramic views from Craftsbury Common, long has attracted tourists and part-time residents from away, another source of prosperity. Some newcomers have built expensive homes or renovated the white-frame farmhouses that dot the town. The town is home to Sterling College and to the year-round Craftsbury Outdoor Center, which attracts sport enthusiasts from across the region and the country.

One result of this diverse, relatively well-educated population is the five libraries in a town of just 1,200, and a summer classical-music series with a statewide reputation.

Craftsbury also has a town Conservation Commission. Its members include an ecologist, a former state fish and wildlife commissioner, a geologist and a high-school science teacher — the kind of people ready to embrace renewable energy, but also primed for skeptical inquiry.

The Conservation Commission took on the task of studying the Lowell Mountain wind development because the mountain is part of Craftsbury's landscape and natural world, Commission Co-Chairman Farley Brown said.

Among other research, the commission studied the testimony of the state's wildlife and habitat experts regarding the ways in which the Lowell Mountain wind farm would transform the mountaintop, fragmenting or removing habitat used by black bears and other animals, and making changes in the upper reaches of the watershed.

Gov. Peter Shumlin's administration concluded this winter that Green Mountain Power's conservation of other habitat sufficiently mitigated the negative effects of the mountaintop development. Craftsbury's Conservation Commission was unconvinced. It voted unanimously to oppose Kingdom Community Wind.

The project will "significantly alter a 450-million-year-old iconic ridgeline visible throughout Orleans County. As stated in the 2005 Craftsbury Town Plan, our natural features are at the core of our sense of place and our community identity," the commission wrote.

After debate, the town's three-member Selectboard agreed to endorse the Conservation Commission's letter and send it to the Public Service Board, though the Selectboard avoided using the word "oppose," Selectboard Chairman Bruce Urie said.

In part, the Selectboard was reluctant to move to outright opposition in the absence of a town-wide vote, Urie said, though he personally would prefer the Lowell ridgeline to stay the way it is. "A lot of people don't have a clue about the scale of this project," he said.

Selectboard member Jim Jones, a dairy farmer, said he was torn. He shared the Conservation Commission's concerns, he said, but was reluctant to interfere with the plans of the mountaintop owner or the town of Lowell.

"I don't want somebody telling me what I can and can't do with my land, so should we tell Lowell what to do?" he asked.

Urie said he understands the wind farm has supporters in town. They include Janet Reed, a farmer's wife in the northwest corner of Craftsbury.

"I just think they're beautiful," she said of wind turbines one day last week as snow fell outside her kitchen window. "And on the functional side, our light bill is going up. What's a better energy source than wind?"

But in the end, the three Selectboard members decided they shared the Conservation Commission's concern about the project's potential effect on Craftsbury and the commission's doubts about the importance of the wind farm's contribution to Vermont's energy future.

"The size is inappropriate for our landscape. It is not in keeping with our state's character," said Susan Houston, the third board member.

### **'A hell of a lot of money'**

Moffat, the Craftsbury tree farmer, still lives in the house where he was born, working the land as he always has done.

Asked what Craftsbury would do if a wind project were proposed in town and would add \$400,000 a year to the tax rolls, he thought a moment.

"I would hope we would not compromise our integrity," he said, "but \$400,000 is a lot of money. A hell of a lot of money."

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