

## Lowell Mountain wind-project opponents carry on despite setbacks



This is a portion of the 8-foot photo montage created by photographer John Matthews of Albany to show a simulation of what the proposed Kingdom Community Wind project would look like if it is constructed on the ridge of Lowell Mountain. The photograph was taken in Irasburg, looking west toward the mountain ridge. The simulated 420-foot towers are drawn to scale, according to those who worked with Matthews to create the simulation, which was provided by opponents of the project.

CRAFTSBURY — Asked why they oppose a wind-turbine development on Lowell [Mountain](#), Steve Wright and Ron Holland unrolled an 8-foot-long photo montage on Wright's kitchen table.

Green farm fields and a white barn softened the foreground against the dark green background of a thickly forested ridge — a classic rural [Vermont](#) view. This, they said, is the landscape that draws visitors and permanent residents to Craftsbury, Irasburg and neighboring towns in the highlands of the Northeast Kingdom.

But this photo of Lowell Mountain had been altered to illustrate a not-so-classic sight: the simulated line of 420-foot-tall white wind turbines strung along the mountain ridge.

“They stick up high,” Holland said.

Wright chimed in, “Why do people come to Craftsbury? Not for water slides and shopping malls, but because of the way Craftsbury looks and

feels to them. The landscape is our economic heartbeat.”

State review of the 21-turbine, 63-megawatt Lowell Mountain project begins Tuesday, and Wright will be there to ensure that point of view is heard.

He and Holland are part of a cadre of Vermonters scattered across the state but united in their opposition to mountaintop wind development and undeterred by a four-year series of decisions running against them.

Those setbacks include state approval of the most recent three commercial wind developments to come before the Public Service Board. The Legislature and Gov. Peter Shumlin have made a priority of renewable-energy development, including wind power.

An outsider might question why local opposition groups continue to believe they can prevail. The answer lies in a combination of personal interest and policy conviction.

Opponents can, and do, marshal arguments about the economics of wind power, its alleged health effects on neighbors, its proper place in Vermont’s energy [portfolio](#).

But the determination that keeps them fighting seems to be located in the heart and the gut.

Most wind-energy opponents, such as Wright and Holland, live deep in the countryside, in places where they were born or chose to live because of the rural quiet, the tapestry of fields and hills, the proximity of woods and [wildlife](#).

Wright, a former Vermont commissioner of fish and wildlife, can make the policy argument that the Lowell project represents an “unacceptable change in the ecosystem of the mountain.” He pointed to analysis by state biologists about how the project permanently would alter the mountaintop.

Holland is a physician and policy analyst whose Irasburg home is some distance from Lowell. Despite that distance, his reaction to the project is visceral and emotional and echoes that of other opponents: “This is just degradation of our landscape. It means the loss of our sacred places.”

His eyes filled with tears, and he stopped speaking.

The Vermont Public Service Board hearings that begin Tuesday are scheduled to continue for 12 days. The board is considering a proposal by two utilities: [Green Mountain](#) Power and the Vermont Electric Co-operative.

They would clear a four-mile road along the undeveloped top of Lowell Mountain and install 20 or 21 wind turbines that would measure as much as 460 feet to the top of their spinning blades. That’s 40 feet higher than the simulation created by project opponents.

In some spots, clearing for the road, shoulders and turbines would be wider than stretches of Interstate 89, a state biologist has testified.

Kingdom Community Wind, as the project is called, is expected to generate enough electricity to power about 20,000 homes. That is 8 percent of Green Mountain’s electric load and an important contribution to the utility’s renewable energy goals, said Dorothy Schnure, a spokeswoman for Green Mountain.

The utility argues — and the state’s public advocate agrees — that the visual and other impacts of the wind development will be outweighed by its energy benefits.

For the town of Lowell, the project would mean at least \$400,000 a year in utility payments, and perhaps as much as \$535,000. For 10 years, another \$150,000 would be divided among five surrounding towns with the closest views of the turbines.

Lowell residents voted to embrace Kingdom Wind last year, 342-114, but some individuals in town formed the Lowell Mountain Group to oppose the project in front of the Public Service Board.

East of the ridge, the towns of Albany and Craftsbury decided to participate in the hearings — but turned the job over to volunteers with instructions not to oppose the project and not to spend any money.

Wright and Mike Nelson, his volunteer counterpart in Albany, gathered an informal group of supporters, found a lawyer to represent the two towns, tracked down experts on the noise, health and aesthetic effects of wind projects, copied and shuttled documents to Montpelier.

At times, Wright said, he has spent 60 to 80 hours a week working on the Lowell Mountain case.

He produces a newsletter, “Windy Tymes” and arranges house parties to brief groups of neighbors. But most of his effort goes into paying the mounting bill.

“How am I spending my time? Ninety-nine percent on raising money,” he said last week over ham sandwiches in his Craftsbury log cabin, a bachelor residence with guns stacked in the bathroom and a spaniel puppy cavorting on the floor. So far the group has raised nearly \$50,000 in private [funds](#) — not enough, he said, to obtain all the expert analysis that is needed.

For example, Wright hired a landscape expert on behalf of Craftsbury. She has filed testimony concluding the development will be more visible from Craftsbury than the utility’s consultant has said.

But she did not assess whether Kingdom Community Wind violates Vermont’s aesthetic standards, the so-called “Quechee test.” Nor will Craftsbury offer expert testimony on whether the visual impact of the project would affect the town’s tourist industry.

“We couldn’t afford any of that,” Wright said. Wright’s is a common complaint of wind-energy opponents: that they are engaged in a David-and-Goliath contest against powerful, well-funded utilities and wind developers.

“We had to represent ourselves,” said Dan FitzGerald of Milton, whose property abuts a four-turbine project approved last year for Georgia Mountain. “We couldn’t afford any experts, so anything we said was just opinion. It isn’t right. It just isn’t right.”

“We all have families and jobs, but this is what the developers do for their 40 hours a week,” added Peter Boynton of Waitsfield, a member of Friends of Northfield Ridge, formed when a wind developer appeared in town. “These are very powerful forces with a lot of money behind them.”

Opponents complain that wind developers single out relatively poor communities such as Sheffield and Lowell, and offer taxpayers lots of money and incomplete information about the effects of wind turbines.

Wind developers such as Green Mountain Power respond that they go where wind speeds, willing landowners and the proximity of utility lines make wind development most attractive. And they make every effort to inform local residents, they say. Green Mountain Power executives went door-to-door in Lowell to answer questions.

Not always are wind opponents too poor to make their case.

Individuals and a group known as Ridge Protectors estimate that together they have spent nearly \$1 million fighting the 16-turbine Sheffield Wind project a few towns east of Lowell. Opponents offered testimony to the Public Service Board, appealed its approval of the development and lost, challenged stormwater permits and lost in court.

Appeals continued as bulldozers began carving a road for the turbines up Granby Mountain in October. Opponent Paul Brouha of Sutton said last week he and others are still considering a stormwater appeal to the Vermont Supreme Court.

“We are not reconciled,” he said. Brouha, a retired U.S. Forest Service biologist, lives on a farm just over a mile from the Sheffield project. The nearest turbine is 1,100 feet from his property line, he said.

“We are trying to face the reality that we may not be able to live here after the project is built, with the noise, the vibrations, the aesthetics,” he said. He said he and neighbors also are considering a class-action lawsuit against the wind farm.

“We hope to expand the class to neighbors of all such projects being proposed or developed in Vermont,” he said.

“My wife and I have been married 43 years, and I can tell you the last few years have been the most difficult because of the stress and tension brought on by this project,” he said. “This burden hasn’t helped my health.”

State policy regarding mountaintop wind-energy development becomes clearer by the day.

Earlier this month, the state Department of Public Service changed its position on the Lowell wind farm.

In October, David Lamont, director of regulated utility planning, filed testimony with the Public Service Board concluding that Kingdom Community Wind “will not promote the general good of the state,” in part because of its undue effect on the beauty of the region.

Last week, Lamont reversed the department’s stance in new testimony. “In considering the various costs and benefits associated with this project, the department has concluded that the benefits outweigh the costs and the project should proceed,” he wrote. “I conclude the aesthetic impacts are limited in their nature, though significant to the individuals involved.”

Opponents remain unswayed, saying changes in Vermont’s landscape matter not just to those who live within view of the towers.

“Of course there is going to be opposition,” said Boynton, the Friends of Northfield Ridge member. “These mountains have a unique importance; they are one of our cornerstone values in Vermont.”

In southern Vermont, lawyer John Liccardi became an opponent of mountaintop wind development after a developer offered plans, now in abeyance, for major wind development in his Rutland County town and others.

He became a founder of Energize Vermont, now a statewide clearinghouse for those fighting wind developments. He believes the future holds out hope for changing the weight of public opinion in Vermont.

“Unfortunately, I think a project will have to be built,” he said. “Then people can look at it and say, ‘Oh my God, look at what we have done.’”

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