

My Turn: Rethinking Lowell Mountain

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Consideration of the Lowell Mountain wind project represents a watershed moment in Vermont. Proponents and opponents of this project need to understand that the decisions made here will have implications for generations — not just in Lowell or the Northeast Kingdom, but for the entire state. For these reasons, I urge everyone to carefully consider this proposal and all of its ramifications. Vermont has been a leader in environmental protection and this is a source of rightful pride. Few would argue that it is fully appropriate to include the potential contributions of renewable energy to meet our present and future needs. It is clear that our energy portfolio will need to contain a mix of various power generation technologies. A combination of individual, local and large-scale methods may also be necessary. What we lack is a comprehensive energy plan to guide our decision-making. Considering power generation projects on an individual basis is inadequate and can have undesirable consequences.

Lowell Mountain has been packaged as an environmentally responsible wind energy project being developed by a Vermont company (Green Mountain Power). The support of the Lowell voters and the mitigation of the environmental and ecosystem damage are emphasized. Let's look beyond the PR to the realities.

First, GMP is owned by a subsidiary of a Canadian energy company. Second, given the prospect of GMP paying the town an estimated \$400,000 a year in property taxes, it's not surprising that 75 percent of Lowell's voters were in favor of this project. The prospect of this revenue and decreased property taxes was a strong financial incentive. Third, the proposed turbines would actually not be within view of many Lowell residents, and other towns like Craftsbury would experience aesthetic and economic impacts. The interests of such towns, and of all state residents, are inadequately considered in this politicized review process.

Legal representation and the presentation of experts at the Public Service Board hearings are expensive. This created an inequitable process in which the financial resources of the proponents far outweigh those of the opponents. Then there's the influence of Gov. Shumlin, the ironic support of the Agency of Natural Resources, and the flip-flop of the Free Press editorial position -- "Take a leap of faith and ride the wind" says the editorial board (Feb. 18) -- what an unfortunate trivialization.

Like many in Vermont, I support developing clean energy sources as an alternative to reliance on fossil fuels or a deficient nuclear power facility. However, I do not feel that mountaintop wind energy projects are appropriate or desirable. The sacrifices and trade-offs are just too great. The beauty of the Green Mountains is invaluable -- it is essential to

our experience. Once such a resource is ruined, there is no turning back. This project includes 40-story turbines emerging from undisturbed forest lands. Despite the modest amount of renewable energy that would be generated (at a cost greater than power from either Vermont Yankee or HydroQuebec), is this really what we want for our state?

A proposal to build 20 40-45 story buildings on any Vermont mountain would be rejected outright as an abomination, inconsistent with our values. How is this wind project really any different? The issue isn't only aesthetics. There would be significant destruction of the mountain ridge and resultant environmental degradation from massive road-building and the overall construction process. Does the goal of wind energy really tip the balance toward approval of such a project? Not in my opinion.

Finally, there's the often ignored issue of cumulative impacts. Such projects, if not eventually part of a larger network, make little economic sense and would not substantially reduce our reliance on other types of energy. Thus, if large scale wind energy is to become a viable means of meeting Vermont's needs, many such projects would be required. Be assured that there are other wind energy project proposals just waiting for an approval of Lowell Mountain. Thus, this project needs to be viewed as only one step toward a future that would include numerous similarly obtrusive and destructive projects. Viewed in this context, approval of this project would have severe and irreversible long-term consequences. Please communicate your opinions to the Public Service Board.

Greg LeRoy lives in Hinesburg.

3 comments

vtmbz

9:36 AM on March 27, 2011

Green Mountain Power is going to make about 50 million dollars over the life of this project, with 32 million of that coming directly from federal tax payers. That's my homely, back of the envelope, figuring. I'd rather keep the money, myself., than give it anybody, offshore or not. No cleanup fund is planned. I guess that means cleanup will be taxpayer funded. We know something about that in Lowell. Maybe GMP will use some of their 32 million to put the mountain back. I imagine by then the towers will be owned by somebody with no assets to sue against, like Entergy of Louisiana for example. In the end, with the amounts of money in play, no rational planning is possible; there is a gold rush mentality at work here. The gold rush ends 12/31/2012, when the federal subsidy expires. Sorry Lowell Mountain, but you're in the crosshairs of a big utility company.

CEO_VEC

12:21 PM on March 27, 2011

For full disclosure, I am the CEO of Vermont Electric Cooperative, who is partnering with GMP on this wind project. Mr. Leroy's commentary is provocative and well written. He has done an excellent job focusing on the main issue related to the Kingdom

Community Wind Project. That issue is how much Vermont values its landscape and what impact will the Kingdom Community Wind project have on that landscape? I think GMP is a very responsible corporate citizen. They are trying hard to comply with the will of Vermont that has been reflected through the Vermont legislature. Vermont requires its utilities to have 20% of its power through renewable sources by 2017. Those renewables include big wind. Vermont utilities are also required to perform "least cost planning", which, by law, they have to seek out lowest cost power sources. The Kingdom Community Wind project is the lowest cost of all the renewable sources. The state of Vermont also recognizes Investor Owned Utilities as an important part of Vermont's landscape. These utilities are guaranteed a rate of return that enable them to operate effectively and attract shareholders, who are key to allowing those utilities to be run effectively. I am not aware of any restrictions on where those shareholders reside. All of our current base-load generation sources are poisoning our environment. Keeping a civil dialogue going about our energy sources is a wonderful thing. Focusing on the landscape and the environmental impact of this project, balanced against all of our energy sources is very important. Attempting to demonize GMP does not add any value to this discussion. I hope we can engage all Vermonters into discussions on where our electricity should come from, and how much we are willing to pay for it.

vtmbz

2:03 PM on March 27, 2011

Dear CEO: Your comments about the Vermont Legislature being the driver behind this wind project are disingenuous. Quoting you: "Vermont requires its utilities to have 20% of its power through renewable sources by 2017. Those renewables include big wind. Vermont utilities are also required to perform "least cost planning", which, by law, they have to seek out lowest cost power sources. The Kingdom Community Wind project is the lowest cost of all the renewable sources. Last year the Vermont legislature approved a change in definition of "renewable" to include Hydro Quebec hydropower. I suspect you know this already. Is Kingdom Community Wind cheaper than HydroPower Quebec?"