

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Wellfleet Energy Committee and Wellfleet Citizens
From: Geof Karlson, Wellfleet Energy Committee April 17, 2010

Subject: What We Can Learn from the Cancellation of the Wellfleet Wind Turbine Project

You may be wondering what happened on March 30, 2010, when the Selectmen voted unanimously to suspend funding for the investigation phase of the Wind Turbine project.

At that meeting, several Selectmen made statements about the project that indicated that they have misunderstandings or questions about aspects of the project that have been explained by the Committee many times in writing and the spoken word. These questions were posed but no opportunity was given for answers. Here are examples of, and answers to, some of those questions and statements:

1. **“Flakey economics”** (Selectman Wood). Actually, the estimated annual revenue for the turbine is now about \$300,000 per year, which is at the high end of the estimates given last summer which were greeted with enthusiasm by the Board of Selectmen at that time. Last summer, the estimates were based mostly on projections. Today, the estimates are based mostly on actual information provided by third parties, and the pro forma budget has recently been reviewed by a third-party industry analyst and now reflects the recommendations of that analyst.
2. **“What if they change the law?”** (Selectman Donovan). Actually, there is a recent example of how the Commonwealth deals with changes in laws that affect “stranded” costs in a government-regulated industry. About 10 years ago, the electricity market in Massachusetts was deregulated. The utility companies had long term contracts and other investments that they were going to take a loss on because of that change. However, the Commonwealth instituted a “transition charge”, a charge every electricity user pays monthly, to cover the losses the utilities had to absorb on certain existing investments and contracts. This charge was implemented about 10 years ago and has about another 15 years in effect. If the net-metering provisions are changed in the future, it is highly unlikely that the legislature would not protect the existing net-metered facilities in a similar way.

3. **“Why did you choose the specific location proposed?”** (Selectman Beebe). The site was chosen because it maximizes the distance to the closest residence. At the site proposed, the closest residence is about 2250 feet away (almost half a mile). At any of the other two sites, the closest residence would be about 1300 feet away, i.e., about 1000 feet closer. This would increase the impact on the closest residences in terms of sound, shadow flicker, and the visual impression of the turbine. Placing the turbine at the proposed location involves the disturbance of less than two additional acres of land, compared to siting it closer to Ocean View Drive.
4. **“The turbine will loom over Duck Pond”** (Selectman Beebe). The turbine would not be visible from the town landing on Duck Pond. It is likely it would also not be visible from the property at the north shore of the pond, or if visible at all, it would only be a part of a rotating blade far in the distance (a photo simulation from the north shore was in the process of being obtained when the funding was stopped). Actually, because of its placement, the turbine does not loom over *any* residence or landmark or easily accessible viewing point.

How is it that the Selectmen were ill-informed about basic questions that had been answered previously?

An intensive lobbying campaign was undertaken by certain subgroups in the community shortly after the Fall, 2009 Town Meeting to *stop the investigation phase* of the wind turbine proposal. This was comprised of the following strategies:

1. Providing unsubstantiated talking points to the local press that were published without even minimal attempts at validation.
2. Personal lobbying of selectmen and others.
3. Dissemination of unsubstantiated assertions to local community groups and advisory boards.

What was in evidence on March 30 is that several selectmen had embraced the unsubstantiated talking points of the subgroups opposed to the project. However, ***the selectmen did not communicate with the Energy Committee concerning the assertions that they had embraced as fact.*** In essence, the Selectmen embraced the erroneous information concerning the project, information that could have been easily verified with the Energy

Committee. This raises the issue of **trust and respect** for the work of the Energy Committee and its members on the part of the Board of Selectmen.

Where the project stood at the time of the Selectmen's vote of March 30:

The Wellfleet Wind Turbine project was to investigate the financial, environmental, regulatory, and health and safety issues relating to the feasibility of a wind turbine sited on Town-owned land within the National Seashore. This was a project of *technical investigation*. As of March 30, the financial and regulatory issues had been answered in the affirmative. The environmental issue was prepared to be addressed by a contract with an environmental consulting firm, to begin April 1. The health and safety issue had been addressed by previous acoustic and flicker studies. There was a plan to perform additional acoustic study to address comments by National Park Service personnel and to address other potential acoustic impacts such as "infrasound".

What the March 30 vote accomplished:

The March 30 vote by the Selectmen cancelled the completion of the technical investigation phase of the Wind Turbine project – an investigation that was begun in 2004, some six years ago. That investigation would have been completed within about 8 months. Because of the cancellation, the following critical information remains unknown concerning the project: (1) what, in fact, would be the environmental impact? For example, are there migrating bats in the area? What endangered species would be affected and how could those impacts be mitigated to the satisfaction of the Commonwealth? (2) What impact, if any, would there be of acoustic issues that are not addressed by the state acoustic standard? (3) What would be the position of the National Seashore administration concerning the project?

What can be learned from the cancellation of the Wind Turbine Project:

There are important lessons that can be learned from the Wind Turbine project:

1. **The local newspapers are completely unprepared to provide validated, in-depth, and helpful information about a project of this technical scope.** While the local newspapers have welcomed the controversy of this project, they have essentially just been able to publish the information that is provided to them without performing due diligence in terms of fact-checking, identifying falsehoods or matters of opinion, or of presenting an informative and balanced analysis of this complex proposal. **Any community member relying on the local newspapers for an understanding of this project will be misinformed.**
2. It is perfectly appropriate for interest groups to lobby decision makers. However, **decision makers such as the Board of Selectmen need to communicate with the volunteers who are working on their behalf to obtain validation, critique, and/or additional information to put their decision making in perspective.** Failure to communicate with the Energy Committee concerning opinions and questions of fact may give rise to decision-making on the basis of potentially erroneous factual information by subgroups with specific personal agendas. This may be unfortunate for the wider community.
3. It is not easy to remain focused on the appropriate decision-making path for a project such as the Wind Turbine project in the face of intense opposition from subgroups in the community, and yet it is vitally important to maintain focus on that appropriate path. Certainly, **the Energy Committee has maintained its focus and did not abandon the technical investigation of this proposal, even in the face of intense pressure from subgroups, pressure often based on conjectural and unsubstantiated claims.**
4. **It is also important that the community have the benefit of elected decision-makers who can remain focused on the appropriate paths for decision making and will take advantage of the expertise of Town committee members in formulating opinions and decisions when they are lobbied intensively by subgroups and individuals within the community.**

The community would be well-served by decision-makers with the commitment to (a) familiarize themselves with the details of complex issues of importance to the community, (b) trust and respect Town committees to the point of soliciting their input when formulating decisions based on lobbying from community subgroups, and (c) *respect the will of the voters as expressed at Town Meeting.*