



Being Green

published: July 23, 2009

Strong opposition in Ira means that developers of a wind energy project there have a lot of work ahead of them before gaining local acceptance.

Even the terminology for the project is in dispute. The developer, Per White-Hansen, has called his project the Vermont Community Wind Farm. Opponents say the project is nothing like a farm and it does little for the community. They are fond of the word "industrial," suggesting that a massive power-generating operation is inappropriate for the lovely ridges of Vermont's mountains.

It is a wind project that would place an as yet undetermined number of wind mills on the ridges of Ira, Poultney and West Rutland. An early projection of possible sites suggested there might be 60 wind mills, but that was only speculative. The developers say it may be closer to 39.

The developer brought trouble on himself by beginning his study of the Ira-Tinmouth area without sufficient advance work — informing citizens, beginning a dialogue, allaying fears. As opposition erupted, White-Hansen brought in Jeffrey Wennberg, former mayor of Rutland, as a community relations consultant to help smooth the way with citizens in the area. They are now in the process of listening to local residents and providing information. A meeting in Ira on Tuesday showed they have a lot of convincing to do.

At this early stage, much of the information that would be of most interest to residents is not yet available. One of the principal concerns of residents is the potential for visual pollution of the mountainous landscape. For Vermonters, their view of mountains, near and far, remains one of the great benefits of living here.

Ultimately, the developers will have a better idea of the visual impact of the project. They are still trying to determine the most suitable sites for their wind machines. When they do, they plan to develop computerized projections of what the installations would look like from almost every angle in the affected towns. A particular wind mill may be visible from only a few places. Others might appear in the far distance.

Modern wind mills are large machines with three enormous sweeping blades; the top of the blade is likely to be 400 feet off the ground. But those who have seen working wind installations in other places often remark that they have a surprisingly benign effect on the

landscape, and that in some cases, they add interest. No one knows what the visual impact of the Ira project will be, but the developer plans on giving residents a good idea once plans become more specific. It may be his best selling tool.

Noise is also a concern of local residents, but the developers are trying to take a conservative approach. Their plan is to make sure the machines are set back far enough from any resident to avoid noise problems — no closer than half a mile.

Wind power must be part of the answer to the problem of climate change. It is not the whole answer; there is no one answer. But if one wind project comparable to the one proposed for Ira were built at a suitable site in each county, wind could end up providing 10 to 20 percent of the state's power. Wind does not blow all the time; production varies from season to season and from night to day. But power generated from wind is power not generated by fossil fuels and not emitting greenhouse gases. Wind is a fast-growing segment of the energy industry, and all citizens have a responsibility to the globe to put their biases about visual or other impacts to a strict test.

It is incumbent upon the developers to provide information on visual and noise pollution. It is incumbent on local residents to retain an open mind so Vermont can make its contribution to the evolution of the new green century.