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Moving ahead

Plans for a wind farm in Ira and nearby towns received a boost on Wednesday when the Public Service Board approved the installation of wind-measuring towers on Herrick Mountain in Ira and Susie's Peak in Clarendon.

Opposition to the project has been strong in Ira and Clarendon, where town officials and other residents have expressed fears that a wind farm would destroy the scenic beauty of their towns without yielding significant electric power or benefits for the environment.

The town of West Rutland has been more receptive, and the developer has already signed a lease for use of land there.

Now it appears support for the project is growing in Ira. Feelings against the project have been strong, and it has taken time for supporters to find their voice. But the supporters are there, led by Ted Sheloski, who has been willing to stand up against what until now has been the prevailing tide of opposition.

Approval of the wind-measuring towers by the PSB does not guarantee that the board will approve the wind farm itself. The project proposed by Vermont Community Wind Farm would place about 40 wind turbines on hills and ridgelines in Ira, Clarendon, West Rutland and Poultney. The eventual number of towers would depend on the size of the turbines used. The developers hope to install turbines with the potential for generating 80 megawatts of power. Thus, larger turbines would mean fewer of them.

The developer of the project, Per White-Hansen, engendered ill feeling in town when word about the project began to spread before he was ready to describe it in full. People's worst fears about huge rotating wind machines took hold, along with worries about sound pollution and other deleterious environmental effects.

Since those early days, White-Hansen has been working to answer the questions of people in the area and to allay fears about the project. He hired former Rutland mayor Jeffrey Wennberg, who is now an energy and environmental consultant, to reach out to the community. They hope residents will reserve judgment on the project until more is known about it and until the developers are able to provide specific information about its impact.

The wind-measuring towers are a first step. The developers will gather information over a year's time on the wind resource available to be harnessed for power generation. The information will help them plan where their wind mills ought to be located.

After they get an idea of the turbines' location, they will generate a computer simulation to show the potential visual impact of the wind mills from throughout the region. At that time residents will be able to make informed judgments on the degree to which the wind machines can be expected to affect the landscape.

Wind power is no panacea, and it cannot be sold as such. There is no single solution for the climate crisis now gripping the globe. Rather, wind is one of a growing arsenal of alternatives to replace carbon-based sources of power, cutting down on the emission of climate-changing carbon dioxide. We need to do everything we can, and it is possible that wind could account for 10 percent of Vermont's electric power needs. Combined with conservation, biofuels, hydro and solar power, wind could be part of a portfolio of renewable sources that could have a telling impact on the state's carbon footprint.

Vermont Community Wind Farm has been alerted to the sensitivity of residents in the region about potential for damage to the environment and the beauty of the landscape. It is likely the developers will proceed with caution.

The issue of wind power has been particularly vexing for environmentalists because supporters and opponents alike base their views on their desire to protect the environment. Against the general and pervasive threat of climate change, we must act in specific and local ways. That is the difficulty in considering the proposal for wind power in Ira.