

# A modest proposal

## Summary of the problem

People live in Cohocton for a lot of reasons. Some were born here and have land that was passed down to them over generations. Others are relative newcomers who've lived here less than 25 years, a few moving into the area very recently. Many are farmers; others work elsewhere and have chosen to live or retire here; and an increasing number have purchased and developed vacation property on and around our scenic hills. Tourism is growing in the region, while agricultural economics are becoming more difficult.

These choices represent two visions of what Cohocton is:

- For those who farm it's primarily a place of *industry* where you can support a family with hard work and careful use of the land.
- For most of the remainder, the 3-R (residential, retirement, and recreational) owners, it's primarily a place of *rest* where you can enjoy peace and quiet in a rural atmosphere away from the city.
- Residential owners appreciate being in a small town where you can make friends and raise a family in safety.
- Many of those who have chosen to retire here were drawn by the breathless natural beauty and tranquility of the land.
- And most recreational owners searched the region for years before they found the place of their dreams in Cohocton.

Residents on both sides of the "industry" vs. "rest" division have been able to live alongside one another happily for years. There have been some rubs, of course, with farm equipment noise, hunters, ATVs, and snowmobiles, but overall the town has been at peace. Enter UPC Wind with its proposal to add a massive industrial wind turbine project into the mix, and we have a formula for social disaster that promises to benefit farmers at the expense of the 3-R owners that surround them.

Is this a winner-take-all fight? At Cohocton Free we believe there's still a path of compromise leaseholders and our Town leaders can pursue that will respect the wishes and preserve the rights of both sides.

## The issues

UPC Wind, leaseholders, and other supporters believe that industrial wind power will mitigate CO<sub>2</sub> production, help global warming, benefit local farmers, boost the local economy, and help support the town's tax base. Many believe the wind tower/turbine units are attractive and will enhance the local viewscape. Few believe there will be any problems with noise, bird/bat kill, ice throw, fire hazard, insurance coverage, drop in property values, or decommissioning. Most are in complete support of Local Law #2 of 2006 and feel that the setbacks and provisions specified in this Law are sufficient to safeguard the interests of local residents. This group generally trusts the developer, current local officials, and the PILOT process and believes that enough studying has already been done and that the community should get on with approving and building the project, no matter what opposition may remain.

Local wind power critics, many of whom are adjacent landowners, believe that the claims made by the wind industry of potential CO<sub>2</sub> mitigation and global warming relief are grossly exaggerated and that the potential benefits to local farmers are outweighed by negative effects on surrounding properties, the community as a whole, and the

environment. Most believe the wind tower/turbine units will be an ugly blight that will seriously detract from the local viewscape. Many believe there are significant unresolved problems with noise, bird/bat kill, ice throw, fire hazard, insurance coverage, drop in property values, and decommissioning. Most believe that Local Law #2 of 2006 has inadequate setbacks and provisions to safeguard the interests of local residents, especially adjacent landowners. This group tends to believe that current local officials have been singularly unresponsive to their concerns, that the PILOT process will enrich outside investors and SCIDA at the expense of the local economy, that the developer and many leaseholders have monetary self-interest as a primary motive, and that more study and discussion needs to take place before any project of this magnitude can be approved. Many feel that state-wide standards need to be established for wind power development in New York and/or that the matter should be brought before the local electorate for a community-wide decision.

### The result

It's taken us a year to arrive at our respective positions, but the result is a deeply divided community with very strong feelings on both sides. The process followed and tactics used on either side have been viewed as deeply offensive by many of those who disagree. Nerves are fraying and tempers flaring. Lawsuits are in the court system with others waiting in the wings, and next fall's electoral process has already begun. Opponents are manning the gunboats while supporters cry, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!"

Obviously, both sides can't be completely right, and sooner or later we will probably find out from our own experience or the experience of others what the truth of these matters really is. In the meantime, is there any room for discussion or compromise? *This chart\** (see endnotes) lays out the possibilities.

### How did we get here?

Careful review of the situation indicates that it's been a simple case of poor hospitality, characterized by neglect of the fundamental moral principle expressed by the *Golden Rule\** (see endnotes), from the very beginning. What do we mean by that?

Leaseholders, most of whom are members of generational families in Cohocton, have had long discussions with the developer, many going back for several years, about the overall project and its specifics. At first a Fenner-like project was envisioned with perhaps 2 dozen GE 1.5 MW turbines, each about 328 feet tall, scattered throughout the agricultural fields on Cohocton's hilltops. Town leaders and a few trusted others were brought into the discussions, and plans to amend our local zoning laws to allow the industrial use of agricultural land were developed. All of this happened without informing or soliciting the input of adjacent landowners. Fairly rapidly the plans grew from one project to at least two with more than 4 dozen units, first 1.5 MW, then 2.0 MW, and now 2.5 MW each and standing over 400 feet tall.

Detailed maps have been available at the Cohocton Wind office on Maple Avenue for over a year that show leaseholders' boundaries, projected turbine sites, and neighboring lands. During this time, leaseholders have given public testimony to the willingness of the developer to adapt its plans to accommodate their wishes. Can one single leaseholder come forward who can honestly say that he has sought out the opinions of the neighbors who border on his land and given their concerns equal weight with his own? Has any leaseholder approached the developer to ask for changes in plans that would accommodate the wishes of adjacent landowners? What we're seeing, instead of a community guided by

the Golden Rule, is what appears to be an established and relatively closed society of those “in the know” who are looking out for their own interests *vs.* what is incorrectly perceived as a motley group of unknown and relatively unwelcome newcomers.

To rephrase the situation using a series of words that start with “c”, neglecting the Golden Rule has led many to seek **concealment**, **confrontation**, and **conquest** instead of pursuing the higher goals of building individual **character** and genuine **community** through fostering open **communication**, **cooperation**, and principled **compromise**.

### What should we do now?

Our proposal is equally simple – we should all begin to apply the Golden Rule\* and see where it takes us, with the following goals in mind:

- Building personal character by committing ourselves individually to doing the right thing, even if it's uncomfortable or involves personal sacrifice.
- Becoming a united community that actively reaches out and welcomes the input and participation of all of its members.
- Arriving at a common decision about wind power development that we can all live with. As Paul Wolcott confessed to me recently, “This isn’t really a life or death thing.”
- Sincerely seeking to become a model community – one that leads the way for other communities in similar situations throughout the Finger Lakes region – by taking a serious look at both sides of the question and arriving at genuinely principled decisions about what is the best way to evaluate and regulate wind power development in our area.

### Proposal specifics

A. We are appealing to **leaseholders** to take the initiative to seek out the individual neighbors who own land adjacent to theirs, get to know them on their own terms, and ask specifically if these neighbors have any concerns about how the proposed project will affect them personally. After looking over maps, measuring distances from proposed turbine units, discussing probable sound transmission patterns, impacts on view, and other potential concerns, leaseholders would then bring the requests and concerns of their neighbors to the developer – as if the concerns were their very own – and ask for specific mitigation.

Why are we asking leaseholders to take the initiative? Because:

- The controversial wind project discussions started with them.
- They've probably lived in the community longer than most of their neighbors.
- They have constructive access to the developer.
- Currently power is in their hands.

B. We are appealing to members of our **Town Board** and **Planning Board** to take their mandate to represent **all** of Cohocton’s citizens very seriously by stepping back from the brink, postponing a decision about turbine site approval, and giving the negotiation and reconciliation process time to develop. It would be helpful if our town leaders would then take the initiative create a neutral forum for community discussion and mutual decision making, rather than continuously lobbying for the approval of a project that has been highly controversial from the earliest days of its public unveiling last year.

C. We are appealing to **Chris Swartley**, as the local spokesperson for UPC Wind, to take the lessons of his advanced degree in Ethics to heart and advocate for a just and equitable process that improves the social fabric of our community rather than continuously stressing it to the point of rupture. This may result in a significantly scaled-down but sustainable project, which would be a much better outcome for all of us, including UPC, than forcing the adoption of one that has already generated too much negativity, or what our global neighbors in the Far East would call bad karma.

Regarding project size, UPC has just completed a wind installation on the Hawaiian island of Maui using 20 GE 1.5 MW turbines with a total nameplate capacity of up to 30 MW. Their project at Mars Hill, Maine, that's attracted so much national publicity for its noise problems and is described by the developer as "the largest wind farm in New England" has only 28 GE 1.5 MW units for a total nameplate capacity of up to 42 MW. There is no reason that UPC has to build two projects in Cohocton with 52 Clipper 2.5 MW units that have a total nameplate capacity of up to 130 MW. And compare the proposed Cohocton PILOT payments with those being described in Mars Hill – they're virtually the same for a project that's 3 times bigger! While he is reviewing the situation, we are asking Chris to address the ethical implications of this disparity.

D. We are appealing to local **wind critics** and adjacent **landowners** to tone down any confrontational rhetoric, clearly define what their bottom-line concerns and specific requests are, and be prepared to compromise for the overall well-being of the community. What would be reasonable alterations in local zoning, and what would be a reasonable process to establish these? How can we move forward within the spirit and letter of Cohocton's current Comprehensive Zoning Plan or alter it with the blessing of the electorate?

E. And we are appealing to the **residents** of our Town as a whole to pull together to make Cohocton a truly welcoming community, one that receives the newcomer, vacationer, retiree, and commuting resident as valued members of a society of equals. As a united community, we can make a difference in our entire region if we will only listen and follow the prompting, timeless wisdom, and inner guidance that underlies the Golden Rule, an ability that's available as a free gift to each and all of us.

"Love your neighbor as yourself"

We're available to all of you to help in any way we can, for the future of our families, our community, our region, and our nation.

God bless you!



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Further information

Go to [www.cohoctonfree.com/proposal.htm](http://www.cohoctonfree.com/proposal.htm) to read this proposal with hyperlinks or to submit your personal comments for public review.

# Endnotes

## Room for Compromise

<b><u>Subject</u></b>	<b><u>Pro-wind</u></b>	<b><u>Middle ground</u></b>	<b><u>Wind critics</u></b>
Global warming	Will help a lot	Could help some	Negligible effect
Size of project	Bigger=better	Could be smaller	Won't fit in Town
Size of turbines	Bigger=better	Could be smaller	Industrial=too big
Unsightliness	Not a problem	Needs attention	Serious problem
Noise	Not a problem	Needs attention	Serious problem
Bird/bat kills	Not a problem	Needs attention	Serious problem
Ice throw	Not a problem	Needs attention	Serious problem
Fire hazard	Not a problem	Needs attention	Serious problem
Insurance costs	Not a problem	Needs attention	Serious problem
Property values	Not a problem	Needs attention	Serious problem
Decommissioning	Not a problem	Needs attention	Serious problem
Road setbacks	OK at 520'	Could be larger	At least 1500'
Property setbacks	OK at 520'	Could be larger	At least 1500'
Dwelling setbacks	OK at 1500'	Could be larger	Should be >2500'
PILOT payments	OK as they are	Could be larger	Way too small
Lease payments	OK as they are	Could be larger	Way too small
Timing	Do it now!	Could wait a while	Not here, not now
Referendum	No	Sensible idea	Needed
Moratorium	No	Sensible idea	Needed
Local leaders	Doing fine	Could do better	Need replacement
NYS regulation	Too much already	Could use help	Need guidelines

## The Golden Rule

The **ethic of reciprocity** or “**The Golden Rule**” is a fundamental moral principle found in virtually all major religions and cultures, which simply means “*treat others as you would like to be treated.*” It is arguably the most essential basis for the modern concept of human rights. Principal philosophers and religious figures have stated it in different ways,

- “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the LORD.” — Torah Leviticus 19:18
- “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” — Torah Leviticus 19:33-34
- “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” — Jesus (c. 5 BC - AD 32) in the Gospels, Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31, Luke 10:27
- “None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” — Muhammad (c. AD 571 - 632) in a Hadith.
- “This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” — *Mahabharata* (5:15:17) (c. 500 BC)
- “What you do not wish upon yourself, extend not to others.” — Confucius (ca. 551 - 479 BC)
- “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man.” — Hillel (ca. 50 BC - AD 10)

Ethical teaching interprets the Golden Rule as mutual respect for one’s neighbor. A key element of the ethic of reciprocity is that a person attempting to live by this rule treats all people, not just members of his or her in-group, with consideration. The rule is meaningless without identifying the recipient and the situation. It has to include an attempt to put yourself in the recipient’s shoes and evaluate how you would wish to be treated if you were in their situation. Another way to rewrite the rule would be “treat others as you would like to be treated, *if you were they.*” It is not a “rule” that should be applied to specific personal preferences or eccentricities. It must always be applied first to the overarching desires that all people share, especially the desire to lead one's life without interruption by others.

## Scripture

“Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?”  
Malachi 2.10

And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:28-31

## Previous submissions

DEIS Comments submitted on June 5, 2006 to Sandor Fox, former Chairman of the Cohocton Planning Board. A copy of our June 2006 letter is available on our website.

SDEIS Comments submitted on February 14, 2007 to Raymond Schrader, Chairman of the Cohocton Planning Board. A copy of our February 2007 letter is available on our website.