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Wind power wafts into area

Towns may permit electricity-producing towers

James Goodman, Staff writer

The wind turbine that went up next to Yuri Odeychuk's home in the Orleans County community of Clarendon was approved by a special-use permit issued by the town last December, without controversy and without restrictions.

Odeychuk, 48, who built the 70-foot-high wind turbine himself, considers his attempt to harness the winds a practical step toward clean energy and self-sufficiency.

He is one of a small but growing number of homeowners who are putting wind turbines on their property – producing just a fraction of the state's electricity.

And, for the most part, town code enforcement and building officials say such requests can be handled by special-use permits or existing ordinances, though the town of Perinton is expected to vote soon on an ordinance to regulate wind turbines.

But the prospect of towering wind turbines – some reaching about 400 feet high – for large-scale generation of electricity has focused public attention on whether existing local regulations are sufficient for the big projects.

Prompted by a developer exploring the possibility of putting 40 to 50 commercial turbines in the northwest part of Hamlin, the Town Board has declared a one-year moratorium on any wind turbines and is looking at how to regulate them.

Meanwhile, six Wayne County towns – Lyons, Sodus, Wolcott, Huron, Butler and Rose – are working to form partnerships with Empire State Wind Energy, a company founded last year with the help of local businessman Thomas Golisano.

As much as \$300 million might be invested by the company to generate wind power in Wayne County in what would be one of the biggest wind-turbine generating projects in the state, said Keith Pitman, president and CEO of Empire State Wind Energy, based in Oneida, Madison County.

Several of these towns are developing ordinances to ensure that local interests are protected.



Yuri Odeychuk, 48, of Orleans County checks the batteries that store the power generated by his wind turbine. The Hamlin Town Board put a one-year moratorium on wind turbines while it researches regulation. A large-scale turbine project also is emerging in six Wayne County towns.

Wind rules

The debate over regulating wind power comes at a time when this form of energy has taken on much greater importance. Nationwide, the amount of energy produced by wind is growing 25 percent to 30 percent a year, and it is now enough electricity for about 3 million homes, says the American Wind Energy Association.

In New York, where officials have set a goal of producing 25 percent of the power in the state from renewable energy by 2013, the state recently awarded nine incentive packages for major wind turbine projects – including two that broke ground in Clinton County on Saturday.

The amount of electricity produced for commercial use by wind in New York is currently about 400 megawatts – but it is projected to almost triple by next year. Each megawatt, says Wind Energy, is enough electricity for 250 to 300 homes.

A big selling point of wind power is that it's a nonpolluting alternative to the rising cost of fossil fuel and a way of reducing carbon dioxide emissions, which cause global warming.

But the sheer size of commercial wind towers, where they are placed, the noise they create and their effect on already shrinking bird populations are issues that critics say must be addressed.

Most recently, the Preservation League of New York State has raised concerns about proposals before the state Legislature that, in streamlining rules for new generating plants, limit the regulatory role of localities.

The "one-stop-shopping approach," said Daniel Mackay, director of public policy for the league in a memo to Gov. Eliot Spitzer's office, "should not dilute the substantive protections contained in current law."

Spitzer spokesman Marc Violette said that while the legislation provides a fast track for siting plants, a community designated for a cluster of big wind turbines would have representation on a siting board.

The Legislature adjourned last week without voting on the proposal, but the legislation could be taken up at a later date. Spitzer said he would keep pushing for this legislation.

Wind issues

In Hamlin, public attention focused on the wind turbines almost a year ago when residents realized that plans were crystallizing for a large-scale project.

Competitive Power Ventures of Braintree, Mass., was considering, according to town documents, 40 to 50 turbines nearly 400 feet tall in the area roughly bounded by Redman, Cook, Monroe-Orleans County Line and Morton roads.

The town has since formed a citizens committee to look into the issue and in March imposed the moratorium on considering any requests for wind generation.

Officials hope to have an ordinance in effect by the time the moratorium expires, but what plans are on the table could be changed because the project has now been taken over by Iberdrola Renewable Energies USA.

The company is headquartered in Radnor, Pa., but is a subsidiary of Iberdrola S.A., which is based in Spain and calls itself the world's leading wind energy company.

The sale of the project to Iberdrola was done in May, said Duncan McEachern, Competitive Power's vice president for development.

Wayne winds

The project emerging in Wayne County is on a larger scale than in Hamlin. But the company, Empire State Wind Energy, stresses working with the community.

"What we saw was that the siting of projects had revolved completely around one criterion – maximizing profit. And therein lies the problem," said Pitman, the company's president.

Pitman has appeared at various public meetings in the county and is now working with officials from Lyons and Sodus, with the company hoping to put 15 to 20 wind turbines in each of those towns.

Officials from Wolcott, Butler, Huron and Rose have also been meeting with Pitman as a group about the siting of 60 additional towers.

"Each town will have a contract with Empire that will set the rules and responsibilities of Empire with our towns," said Rose Supervisor Lucinda Collier.

The entire Wayne County project, generating something like 200 megawatts, could produce as much as \$2 million a year for the six towns under the kind of profit-sharing agreement contemplated, Pitman said. Revenue would come from the company that sells the electricity produced by the wind turbines to utilities and other marketers.

Wind-generated electricity, said Pitman, now might not be cheaper than power produced with some other fuels, such as coal, but there are the environmental benefits to consider. And the cost of producing wind power isn't subject to big fluctuations, which could save the consumer money in the long run.

Still, the prospect of having as many as 100 wind towers with spinning blades reaching 400 feet into the sky presents many unknowns, including what effect the towering turbines might have on birds.

"There will be a lot of research on the issues, including environmental and animal impact," Pitman said.

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What's at stake

The supply of electricity. Wind power has become increasingly popular, but concerns have been raised about placement of the large power-generating turbines.