

# Exploring the costs and benefits of wind energy

By Michaela Kennedy

Technical, environmental and financial considerations were focuses of presentations by consultants at the June 12 meeting of the Wind Energy Committee. The committee listened to expert advice on proceeding with a feasibility study to bring the renewable energy source to Jamestown.

Omay Elphick, deputy director of People's Power and Light (PP&L), urged the committee to move quickly and efficiently to define their motivation for exploring wind energy possibilities. He acknowledged the charge of the committee was wind as a resource, but suggested other sustainable renewable energy possibilities may be worth examining.

Elphick explained that PP&L "consistently goes after renewable energy certificates."

The energy consumers' alliance buys green energy and sells it to consumers.

The non-profit organization does feasibility studies, and wants the ability to bid, according to Elphick.

He listed permitting and contracting as technical elements to include in a study for wind energy. Ownership structure encompasses land leases, as well as energy contracts, that may be town, developer or operator owned. "There are numerous contracts that can affect the lifetime of your project," he said.

The island should evaluate revenue models, which may allow a municipality to pay wholesale prices for energy, or avoid some

costs. A discussion ensued about renewable energy certificates (RECs), also known as green tags, renewable energy credits, or tradable renewable credits. The credits are the property rights to the environmental benefits from generating electricity from renewable energy sources. These certificates can be sold and traded, and the owner of the REC can legally claim to have purchased renewable energy, the consultant explained.

Elphick warned that towns can not benefit from federal production tax credits. "Investors that are tax hungry can benefit. You want to make sure someone gets the benefit, so that benefit is passed on to you," he said.

As a town, financing avenues are different from a private entity, and fixed costs for 25 years offer many benefits. Elphick named John Deere and General Electric as examples of companies that are commercially competitive in wind energy. "It's big business now, a capital project," he said.

Elphick also addressed engineering details, such as soil, grid interconnections and turbine installation. He suggested making an environmental assessment before putting too much money into a project. "Take ground soil into consideration, such as whether there is rock or a landfill."

The speaker talked about basics when considering how large a structure to build. He noted that wind speed increases exponentially with increase in height, and turbulence decreases. He showed a view of mid- to large- scale tur-

bine economics, where 90 percent of the turbine cost cannot be controlled. He went on to show 20 year averages that demonstrated savings by turbine size. "Bigger is better," he said.

Elphick suggested taking a close look at how much energy the town consumes. "It's easier to reduce than to build energy capacity," he added.

The last but not least point Elphick made was to pay attention to public acceptance. Noise is easily addressed through noise studies and newer turbine designs, he said.

Regarding views, he suggested sponsoring trips to existing turbines. Some critics worry about property values, but studies have shown turbines enhance views, and in turn increase property values. Elphick noted that some of the most appealing development packages involve private companies. He saw nothing wrong with having for-profit developers, "but public benefit should be defined early."

He encouraged committee members to visit other projects, such as Portsmouth Abbey, Mass Maritime Academy, and turbines built in nearby Massachusetts and Connecticut.

"Get people who are curious and visit," he said.

Also offering their expertise at the meeting were Daniel Mendelsohn from Applied Technology Network, and Dennis Loria who was project manager for Rhode Island Winds project. They agreed with Elphick that engineering and environmental aspects should be given focus, but stressed that aes-

thetics is the principal concern.

Mendelsohn and Loria gave the following criteria for consideration in site selection:

- Wind speed
- Nearby loads
- Total area available
- Nearest receptor
- How to tie in to a distribution system
- Environmental sensitivity

They suggested the criteria be incorporated into a feasibility study.

Loria noted that the state was currently focusing on offshore wind projects. He suggested the

committee keep an eye on legislation that would affect wind energy costs.

"Forming a municipal utility is difficult, expensive and complicated," he said.

They added ideas to points already discussed. An environmental analysis should include studies of bird migration paths or other effects to wildlife. An economic analysis should look for costs over time. "Having predictable energy costs is important to businesses and towns," Loria said, adding that public perception and education were also crucial to an economic analysis.

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