

Comments: The Bluewater Commercial Scale Wind Energy Facilities By-Law January 12, 2009

- presented by Paul Mennill, Communications Director, Bluewater Shoreline Residents' Association

Background

At the two most recent general meetings of the Bluewater Shoreline Residents' Association, the members of the shoreline communities identified Wind Energy as one of the top four priorities that our Board should pursue. I spoke to Council on this matter on July 14, 2008. Tonight, in the best interests of Council's time I will not repeat the statements I made that night. But I would like to give you a brief refresher and an update.

- First, I said that the Board of BSRA is not opposed to wind-power as a potentially beneficial alternative energy source to meet a small amount of Canada's power requirements. But we are opposed to the creation of industrial-scale wind-turbine installations which, by their size and noise, have the potential to damage the health of Bluewater residents and the natural environment of our landscape.
- Second, I said "We are pleased that the current proposal includes a prohibition on large wind turbines west of highway 21. But as members of the larger Bluewater community, we believe that this does not go far enough. We recommend a set-back of 2000 meters from all urban/settlement areas (shoreline, hamlets, and villages)."
- I also said that we fear that the Ontario guidelines will not sufficiently protect the natural environment, the health of some inhabitants, the landscape, the tourist business, and property values in the municipality.
- In general, I suggested that Bluewater should proceed only with a very high degree of caution.

In developing these recommendations, I reminded Council that many people are unhappy with the location of the turbines near Kettle Point and that many people believe such huge industrial structures do not have a place in areas where people grow and live. I also reminded Council that human settlement patterns and agricultural patterns in southern Ontario are quite different from those regions in Europe and America where many wind farms are located. We in southern Ontario do not have the bare mountains, hills, huge ranches, and wide open spaces that are found elsewhere. I pointed out that the scientific community is not in agreement regarding appropriate setback distances and that the question of the effect of turbine noise, low vibrations, and the sun flicker effect on residents are serious considerations.

Today's Considerations

As I speak with you today, the debate has grown even more vigorous. And again, we are urging caution. The primary issue today is the location of turbines. While there are many other concerns, the main issue in front of us tonight is where turbines should be located or should not be located.

What has happened in recent months as this debate moves forward? I would like to refer to four recent newspaper and television reports.

1. On November 25, 2008, in the Globe and Mail, columnist Margaret Wenthe described the protests that had just taken place in Toronto over the proposal to erect turbines in Lake Ontario. She said the following: "Who could possibly object to wind power? ... The citizens. Last night in Toronto, hundreds of anxious folks jammed a meeting called to discuss plans for a massive wind farm along the shores of Lake Ontario. They fear the 90-meter turbines will chop up birds, disrupt migration routes, destroy views, lower property values, even make them sick. NIMBYs? No doubt. But they have a lot of company. Across Canada, Britain and Europe, a growing protest movement is arguing that wind farms are not good for the environment."
2. On December 27, the CTV television program W-FIVE, aired a program called "Caution to the Wind". In the introduction, the following statement was made: "No doubt about it, green is good. So

why is it that across the country, more and more people are seeing red over wind energy? Some say that in the rush to develop wind power, current government regulations aren't doing enough to protect human health, or the environment." W-FIVE interviewed a woman named Helen Fraser who lived in a house 400 meters from a turbine in Melancthon Township. Initially a supporter of wind energy, she eventually found that she and her husband had to move out of their home because the "whoosh" sound of the turbine blades, added to the strobing effect of sunshine through the blades, caused headaches, body aches, and sleepless nights." On the same program, Dr. Robert McMurtry, a former assistant deputy minister at Health Canada, said that his review of the scientific literature from around the world has raised serious health concerns. He told W-FIVE "The low frequency noise has a particular problem. And a number of people have reported ill effects including headaches and dizziness and ringing in the ears or sometimes worse."

3. On January 02, 2009, in the National Post, David Frum asked the question "Must we destroy the environment in order to save it?" He stated that responsible stewardship means protecting what is lovely and natural. And that to people in Prince Edward County threatened by wind farms "it seems perverse to ruin the landscape in the name of preserving the environment".
4. As recently as January 06, again in the Globe and Mail, an article by Martin Mittelstaedt conceded that there are significant problems with wind energy because it is such an inconsistent source. Mittelstaedt pointed out that Ontario has never ordered a full environmental hearing to evaluate the pros and cons of a wind-power project. He also suggested that it may be possible that residents near turbines should be compensated, the way that people living near dumps are sometimes compensated for lost property values.

Clearly, as reflected in these examples of recent media reports, a strong momentum has developed among those who believe that the setback issue must be resolved on the side of caution. There still are questions of human health and well-being, questions of scenic impairment and natural life, and questions of property values and local control.

It is not my purpose tonight to review any of the larger economic, political, or ethical questions that lie under this debate. It is enough to say that shifting tides of opinion are causing wind energy to swing up and down the scale of public favour as time moves on.

And I must add that we are disappointed about the advice you have received from the County Planning staff. It has failed to recognize concerns that we have identified in the past, it is excessively conservative with respect to the potential of OMB rulings on any appeals, and it appears to reflect a cookie cutter approach that all lower-tier municipalities should adopt similar setbacks.

Setbacks

Specialists and politicians alike are still divided on the question of appropriate setback distances. There is much conflict across Canada, the United States and Europe as to how great the setbacks should be in more settled areas and in areas of smaller farms. Many leaders in the environmental and health fields want to maximize setbacks. There are some reports of sleep disturbance from residents as far as three kilometers from turbines. The questions regarding noise-based standards are very complicated and there is much disagreement about what is best, both among the specialists and among ordinary citizens like us.

Setbacks in New Zealand generally are 2 kilometers. In Germany, they are 1600 meters, in Holland 1800 meters. Here in Ontario, we still must face the fact that some people living near wind turbines experience significant health problems. We must also consider the question of the impact of giant wind farms close to scenic highways as well as airports. In some US jurisdictions, a "scenic setback" from major highways is a requirement. Many advocates suggest that our governments are not paying sufficient attention to these issues... and that it may very well come back to hurt us all in the future.

Summary

As the W-FIVE program stated, many people in Canada “want tougher rules governing how close turbines may be built to people’s homes.” We also have received questions that we are not able to answer and which we believe Council may want to deal with before it establishes strict setback limits. For example, “In Ontario, where will the energy come from when the winds are not blowing?” And “What are the costs of installing one wind turbine?” And “what will the tax revenues be from each turbine?”

We continue to urge caution and we urge Council to take a long-term view.

- We believe that Bluewater requires a setback distance from urban-settlement areas of 2000 meters, particularly where possible growth is projected.
- We also support a scenic setback 2000 meters east of Highway 21.
- We have not taken a specific position with regard to front, side or rear yard setbacks, or landfills, cemeteries, and institutional settings, but we urge caution.
- We recommend that Council give especially careful consideration to safety with regard to airstrips, particularly for airstrips that have already been in existence in our community for some time.
- We also ask Council to leave room in Bluewater for other kinds of renewable energy projects that are emerging or will come in the future.
- And we urge Council to insist on proper environmental impact assessments prior to any construction.

Given the current controversy, we believe that our position is a modest proposal, not an extreme one. It leaves a very large portion of rural Bluewater available for wind development. We think it is both reasonable and prudent for the municipality to take a cautious approach to the wind-energy industrialization of our special municipality.