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Niagara Legislature opposes Somerset windmills, questions Pendleton compressor

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LOCKPORT – The Niagara County Legislature unanimously went on record Tuesday against the construction of wind turbines in Somerset and demanded an independent safety study regarding a natural gas pipeline compressor in Pendleton.

The Somerset controversy stems from Apex Clean Energy of Charlottesville, Va., proposing to erect about 70 wind turbines, each as much as 600 feet tall, in the Route 18 corridor near the Lake Ontario shore.

The project, which is expected to extend into the Orleans County Town of Yates, is opposed by two-thirds of the property owners in Somerset, according to a mail-in survey the town conducted in June, with a 56 percent return rate.

However, the town is unable to enforce its opposition, because the decision on whether to allow the project to go forward lies in the hands of a board to be dominated by state representatives. Only two members are to be local residents, but they are to be chosen by the leaders of the State Senate and Assembly.

The resolution the Legislature passed also sounds off against the 2011 state law that overrode local governments' powers in regard to wind energy. Somerset Supervisor Daniel M. Engert said his Town Board passed a resolution of opposition July 8.

Engert said his town is researching legal means of fighting the state law that overrode local authority over wind power projects. "Please stand with us in the fight to retain home rule," he said to loud applause.

John Riggi, the president of the citizen group "Save Ontario Shores," slammed town residents who have leased land to Apex for failing to realize "they do not live on an island."

"We feel having wind turbines on our land is a good way to diversify," seventh-generation Somerset dairy farmer Ben Atwater said, attributing the opposition to "fear of the unknown. ... There has been overwhelming support by landowners in the proposed project area."

The National Fuel Gas/Empire Pipeline compressor, to be built off Beach Ridge Road in Pendleton, has triggered fear that an explosion could destroy many homes and kill residents.

The compressor is part of a planned enlargement of four miles of existing natural gas pipelines in the town, from 16 inches to 24 inches.

Besides the potential danger, objections raised by a citizen group called the Pendleton Action Team have included noise and air pollution. "A compressor station does not belong in a residential area of 320 homes and near our Starpoint Central School," group member Kim Lemieux said.

"It is the Niagara County Legislature's belief that these concerns are serious and genuine," said the resolution, sponsored by Legislator Anthony J. Nemi, I-Lockport, whose district includes Pendleton.

Nemi's resolution calls on National Fuel to pay for a safety study.