

Commentary: Energy report has many flaws

By Gary A. Abraham May 31, 2019



Photo: Daniel Acker

Daniel Acker/Bloomberg

The New York League of Conservation Voters has issued a new policy statement, "Breaking the Barriers to Siting Renewable Energy in New York." The statement is seriously flawed as a result of its unwillingness to tackle the reasons for rural resistance to siting industrial projects of unprecedented size and adverse impact. The statement assumes this resistance is the principal problem that must be solved.

The League fails to disclose that Apex Clean Energy, a developer proposing a massive industrial wind project in Niagara and Orleans counties, is a corporate sponsor at the "Silver" level of the League's Education Fund. The League is also unwilling to address the real reasons rural communities oppose large scale industrial wind projects – communities simply do not want to see rural land turned into industrial land.

"Breaking the Barriers" dismisses local planning documents and zoning laws that address a community's vision for itself and its relation to development. Such laws should be respected by developers looking for siting options.

There are also a number of failures in the report. It fails to acknowledge that 88 percent of upstate energy is generated from zero emission sources (including nuclear power); it fails to address the unintended consequences of industrial wind turbines' necessary reliance on "fast ramp" backup power sources, which in New York are powered by natural gas; and it fails to acknowledge the lack of plans for building new bulk transmission lines to move power to the downstate area and the strong opposition from upstate communities to these projects.

The report ignores the important distinction between power generation and power utilization. It does not note that industrial wind projects generate very few full-time jobs, and in calling for more public education and engagement, the report ignores the fact that the current Article 10 siting process for power projects requires both. It also ignores how the Renewable Energy Credit process is harming the energy market, leading to wind-generated power having negative value, while ignoring many other alternatives to achieve the state's energy goals.

A typical upstate wind project will reduce New York's carbon dioxide emissions by about 0.05 percent, according to information developed in the state siting process. This means that it will take 20 industrial wind projects to reduce emissions by 1 percent. Considering the small contribution industrial wind projects can make to New York's emissions reduction goals, this report's emphasis on overcoming rural resistance is misplaced.

Rural communities trying to reasonably preserve and develop rural amenities see the spoliation of the night sky with dozens and dozens of elevated blinking red FAA warning lights, the fragmentation of forested lands, and the introduction of an industrial noise source as the wrong kind of development. In light of the small contribution they can make to New York's emissions reduction goals, this report's emphasis on developing large-scale renewables upstate is at best misplaced.

Gary A. Abraham is a public interest environmental attorney in western New York. He currently represents several intervenors in Article 10 proceedings to site large-scale renewable power projects across upstate.

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