

Southtowns residents mobilize against proposed wind farm: 'We all moved to the country to be in the country'

Barbara O'Brien September 14, 2023

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Bob and Peg Hamels of North Collins first heard about a proposed wind farm in southern Erie County about two months ago, when Peg was approached about signing a lease with a company owned by the French government.

“Have you talked to the Town Board yet?” she asked the company representative. “You need to talk to the Town Board first before we even talk to you, because we don’t know anything about it.”

A week later, a neighbor gave them a lawn sign opposing the project, and now they are part of a growing opposition, posting a large banner in front of their 39-acre property on Sisson Highway (Route 75) overlooking the Boston Hills.

The Hamels and others in North Collins, Collins, Concord and Eden have mobilized to get the word out before any more property owners sign leases with the company, EDF Renewables.

Many residents see the wind farm as an existential threat to their way of life.

“We all moved to the country to be in the country,” North Collins Supervisor John Tobia said. “This is rural farm country and the citizens like it this way.”

EDF wants to erect 30 to 40 wind turbines that are 655 feet high, which include a 390-foot tower with blades that stretch 265 feet from the hub.

The massive turbines would be the tallest structures in Western New York, higher than Seneca One Tower, which is 529 feet tall. The turbines at Steel Winds on the former Bethlehem Steel site are about 400 feet tall.

Project benefits

Collins Wind would generate 200 MW of power, enough to power 85,000 homes, according to the company. The electricity generated will be injected into transmission lines along the Thruway in Brant.

“The vast majority of the energy is projected to be consumed locally in Erie, Chautauqua and Niagara counties, including in Buffalo, while some will be transmitted further away,” Kevin Campbell, EDF director of development, said in an email.

Payments to property owners who sign leases start with \$3,500 a year after they sign the agreement, residents were told by the company at a North Collins Town Board meeting earlier this year.

During construction, the payments climb to \$10,000 for properties with turbines, and \$5,000 a year for properties with roads or collector lines but no wind turbines.

When the wind farm is in operation, property owners with turbines would be paid \$20,000 a year, increasing by 2% each year, or 2% of gross revenues, whichever is greater.

And even those who do not have turbines on their property but who sign lease agreements would split 2% of the gross revenues, proportional to the amount of acres in their lease.

In addition to annual payments to property owners who sign leases, the company said more than \$2 million per year would be paid to Erie County, the four towns and host school districts through a payment in lieu of taxes agreement that has yet to be negotiated.

Opposition mounts

At least a half dozen property owners have signed leases, which are for 49 years.

Opponents hope that if they can persuade enough land owners not to sign leases, there will not be enough locations for a viable project.

“They don’t think people are educated. They expect everyone just to sign a contract because farming is tough these days,” said Ann Moritz, one of the organizers of the opposition who also is a member of the North Collins Zoning Board.

A North Collins Town Board meeting in June on the wind farm attracted about 100 people. A meeting in August had to be moved to Epiphany of Our Lord Catholic Church in Langford, to accommodate the more than 300 who showed up.

“I just don’t think people are being educated enough to understand what the ramifications are, what they’re up against,” Bob Hamels said.

Once they heard of the proposal, residents quickly organized Concerned Citizens of the Collins Wind Project. A Facebook page started in mid-May gained more than 900 members by the first week in September. More than 675 lawn signs have been distributed, and the group started a GoFundMe campaign to raise money.

They are concerned about environmental and health effects. Most residents in the project area have well water, and are concerned construction of the foundations for the turbines may disturb, disrupt or contaminate the aquifer that supplies those wells.

They are also worried about sleep disturbance, headaches, nausea and other symptoms reported by people who live near wind turbines. The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority maintains there is no scientific or medical evidence that wind turbines cause those symptoms.

Lease latitude

The leases give EDF the “right to emit or cause the emission of noise, vibration, air turbulence, wake, and electromagnetic and frequency interference and to permit wind turbulence, to overhang, cast shadows, or cause flicker onto the property and/or to impact lessor’s view of and from the property.”

“Noise, vibration, air turbulence and shadow flicker are mitigated through setbacks and operational measures, as determined by the permitting process,” Campbell said in an email.

Under the leases, the company can access the property 24 hours a day, and select the location of turbines and other facilities.

Those who sign the lease may need the company’s approval to change existing structures or build new ones. If grazing animals damage wind equipment, EDF could require them to be removed from the property.

There also is a confidentiality clause, prohibiting the property owner from discussing terms and conditions of the lease, or responding to inquiries from the news media without first obtaining written permission, even after the lease expires.

Campbell said the clause is standard for land agreements in the industry.

“We work with contractors and vendors whose methods may be proprietary and not to be shared publicly. Terms of and conditions of our agreements are to remain confidential due to the competitive nature of our business, to protect intellectual property and maintain a strong competitive industry,” he said in an email.

EDF Renewables owns and operates the 80 MW Copenhagen Wind project in Jefferson and Lewis counties, and has developed 72 wind projects across North America.

“EDF Renewables is committed to developing a responsibly sited wind project that will create more than 80 construction jobs for up to two years, provide significant new income for landowners to

support their farming business, families and livelihoods, and contribute significant new investments to the community, including providing more than \$2 million dollars in new revenues for host towns, county and school districts annually,” according to Campbell.

The company hopes to start construction in 2027.

North Collins has regulations regarding solar and wind projects, and enacted a three-year moratorium last month. Collins is researching regulations and a possible moratorium, Supervisor Kenneth Martin said.

Eden’s code covers wind farms. The Town Board scheduled a public hearing Wednesday on a six-month moratorium on wind energy conversion projects. Concord has no ordinance or local law governing wind farms, and the Town Board will hold a public hearing Oct. 5 on a three-year moratorium.

State siting clout

But some believe local laws and moratoriums won’t keep the turbines away.

“They can ignore our laws,” Martin said. “Even if we put a moratorium on, they’re going to continue to sign people up.”

A state law passed three years ago established the Office of Renewable Energy Siting, which rules on renewable energy applications – keeping in mind the target established in the 2019 Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA) that 70% of the state’s electricity must come from renewable sources by 2030.

Under the law, companies must consult with local municipalities and there is a public comment period. The siting board must consider local laws when making its determination, but it can override local regulations if it finds they are “unreasonably burdensome in view of the CLCPA targets and the environmental benefits of the proposed major renewable energy facility.”

Residents say the small communities are close, but they fear the friendly atmosphere could be shattered as residents learn who has signed leases.

“It’s going to create division,” Tobia said, “amongst the citizens of the town.”