

Burlington Free Press

This piece is written by an opposing newspaper, the "Vermont Guardian" but clearly the Free Press has the facts.

Vermont Guardian
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For more than two years, The Burlington Free Press has, like clockwork, poked, prodded, cajoled, and generally lambasted plans to construct wind turbines on select Vermont ridgelines.

The editorial voice of the state's largest daily newspaper has been loud and clear in terms of wind farms: Not here, not now, not ever.

That view is at odds with public opinion in Vermont, which remains heavily in favor of wind power — even if people can see turbines from their homes, according to the latest poll by WCAX-TV.

In a survey released May 12, WCAX reported that 74 percent of Vermonters support the development of wind power, and 69 percent support it even if they can see it.

This mirrors several other polls conducted by Macro International in recent years, as well as those conducted by both Central Vermont Public Service and Green Mountain Power, according to Andrew Perchlik, executive director of Renewable Energy Vermont (REV).

This consistent support has not deterred the Free Press from maintaining a keen skepticism, if not outright disdain, for wind power.

While two years of editorials have not dissuaded Vermont's majority, there is one person the Free Press has influenced — Gov. Jim Douglas.

The Douglas administration has issued directives that limit the use of wind power on state-owned lands for commercial purposes, and is offering conflicting opinions on a four-turbine project in the Northeast Kingdom. That project is currently before the Public Service Board awaiting a final ruling. A hearing officer, in his advisory ruling to the board, recommended against its construction.

According to the judges of a recent contest for public service journalism, editorial page editor Susan Reid walked away a winner for "courageous and illuminating" editorials specifically about wind power.

Reid did not return several phone calls and e-mails for this story.

The Sevellon Brown Award is given annually by the New England Associated Press News Executives Association to a journalist at a daily newspaper with a circulation greater than 40,000.

This year's award entries were judged by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, said Larry Laughlin, the New England bureau chief for the Associated Press. Each year, NEAPNEA contracts with judges outside of New England to review contest entries.

Laughlin said judges are looking for what they perceive as a series that has an impact and makes an impression.

Clearly, the Free Press' editorials, and its editorial pages, made an impression on the judges.

"By questioning whether Vermonters were willing to sacrifice the pristine appearance of their mountain ranges in order to get an alternative energy source that would generate a modest share of the state's needs, the editorial series forced an environmentally aware state to see the complexities of what at first seemed like an easy, environmentally correct endorsement," wrote the judge. "That is a major public service to readers in Vermont.

"In the end, even the governor, who straddled the fence when the debate began, saw the wisdom of the newspaper's argument and slowed down the juggernaut that seemed certain when the year began," the judge concluded. The identity of the AJC's judge was not made available.

A Vermont Guardian review of editorials published by the Free Press in 2005 were consistent in their emotional appeal to readers based on the aesthetic argument, but offered little in terms of a broader opinion on what power sources should be pursued, or be part of, Vermont's energy future.

In a March editorial, "Big wind, small state," urging people to take part in a series of public hearings about wind power in the Northeast Kingdom, Reid wrote: "People who care about their ridgelines and the character and landscape of Vermont should pay close attention to these hearings. The outcome could open the door to a dramatically changed state. The natural beauty and solitude of Vermont's wildest, highest places could be replaced by rows of industrial wind turbines standing more than 30 stories high and lighted like mountaintop runways."

In a separate editorial, "Wind picks up speed," Reid urged readers even more to take action: "These mountains, the rare northern quiet and spectacular natural beauty that are so integral to Vermont need protection. Stand with the people in these communities who are trying to save their ridgelines from industrial wind development. Ask the governor for leadership on this issue, or watch giant wind turbines sprout from the Green Mountains."

And, on April 14, 2005, she took the Douglas administration to task for supporting the East Haven Windfarm project, and for not providing enough guidance on the development of other proposals: "Commercial wind turbines on Vermont ridgelines pose one of the greatest environmental challenges to face this state," she wrote, adding that the East Haven project would provide an infinitesimal amount of power for the state at a much higher cost — the loss of pristine ridgelines.

By October, the paper's tone toward the governor changed and Douglas was heralded for changing his tune and becoming an opponent of large-scale commercial wind power, and calling for smaller-scale turbines, dubbed "Vermont scale" by the paper and Douglas.

"The governor, whose position had been fuzzy previously, started to speak out against the industrializing of Vermont's ridgelines for an 'incremental' amount of power," Reid wrote in December.

A top aide to Douglas said while the editorials did have some effect on the governor's thinking, it wasn't the only source he considered as his position evolved during the year.

"I don't want to take away from the superior editorial quality of The Burlington Free Press, but the governor has maintained his position on wind power for quite some time. It is certainly fair to say he appreciates their point of view, but I don't believe it's accurate to say that he arrived at his opinions based on what the Free Press wrote in its editorials," said Jason Gibbs, Douglas' press secretary, in response to the award judge's assessment.

"His position on East Haven is as it always been. East Haven should be allowed to go forward as it was working its way through the regulatory process before he became governor, and he does believe it would be a useful demonstration project, but he does not think that it would be prudent to industrialize or commercialize Vermont's ridgelines and that is an opinion he's held for many years," Gibbs added.

That opinion, Gibbs said, was allowed to come to the fore thanks to the editorial positions of the Free Press.

"Certainly, perhaps the editorials gave him reason to be sure that his point of view was understood clearly by Vermonters, but these have always been his positions on wind power," Gibbs said.

Those positions are perpetuating a status quo that forces the state to import 90 percent of its power rather than generating more of its own, and allows the state to export all of its potential environmental hazards, claim key wind power supporters.

These same supporters take issue with the Free Press winning the award, and claim that the state's penultimate daily has been misleading the public, perhaps deliberately, about the impact of such development.

These say that Free Press editorial writers have refused repeated calls to clarify what kind of energy development they support. In private meetings, members of the Free Press editorial board have reportedly expressed support for clean coal technology as well as nuclear power, claiming they will be more beneficial to Vermont's environment and its aesthetic values than wind power.

Already, the Free Press is a likely nominee for REV's annual Energy Ostrich Award, to be awarded in October, for sticking their head in the sand when confronted with energy policy questions, said Perchlick. Last year, the Free Press received the award, which consisted of an ostrich egg on top of a bucket of sand for the same issue, but in particular its harangue against wind power.

Nobody from the Free Press was at the group's annual conference, so it was hand delivered to them afterward, said Perchlik.

"It is clear that the Free Press is not interested in an intelligent discussion or investigation into our energy choices. They simply don't like the look of wind farms and that's the end of it," said Perchlik. "They are using their bully pulpit to advance an extremely myopic and discriminatory energy policy that is leading us to a future of higher electrical rates, lost economic opportunities, and increased energy security risk."

One ardent (**and commercial**) wind power supporter, Dave Blittersdorf of NRG Systems in Hinesburg, a winner of several top business awards from Douglas as well as Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility, has given up trying to change the minds of the Free Press editorial board.

"I'm not even going to write an 'It's My Turn,' [the paper's op-ed space], because the last time, they cut out part of it and never told me and published it," said Blittersdorf.

Blittersdorf said a one-on-one meeting with Reid and the former editorial page editor, David Awbrey, was illuminating,

Essentially, the pair said they were opposed to wind power due to aesthetics, and also believed that the state would do better by clean coal technology, more nuclear power, and more hydropower from Hydro Quebec, he said

"We challenged him and [Reid] to come out with an editorial supporting clean coal and nuclear and this is the reason why, because that would be an honest debate, but they said they couldn't do that," said Blittersdorf. "They are on a religious mission, basically."

Blittersdorf said the paper's largest ongoing factual errors involve aesthetics.

"Survey data shows that Vermonters can accept that," he said. "Folks who say it's going to despoil the ridgelines don't want to look at the data. Aesthetics is not an environmental issue, it's a people issue. And Vermonters have gotten past the aesthetic impact and are willing to accept it."

Blittersdorf said the Free Press and other opponents are also perpetuating myths about wind power's reliability, even after repeated attempts to correct their errors.

Today's wind farm operators can better predict when the wind will blow, sometimes days in advance, and plan for it, he said. The intermittent nature of wind, as well as solar and hydro, in one part of the region can easily be counterbalanced by similar power sources generating electricity in other parts of the area.

"They basically don't understand that the [New England power] grid is a system of many different sources — storage, peaking units, and base load," said Blittersdorf. "The grid acts as the big battery and leveler of the power. In fact, customer load is more unreliable and intermittent than power sources."

It's easier to find replacement power for small power sources like a 4-megawatt wind turbine that goes offline than for Vermont Yankee if it goes offline, Blittersdorf adds.

Having distributed energy sources will help to boost in-state power generation, allowing Vermont to import less of the electricity it needs while at the same time reducing greenhouse gas emissions, he said.

"What we have right now is a bunch of silver BBs, there is no silver bullet anymore," said Blittersdorf in regard to lessening our dependence on outside electricity sources.

Blittersdorf doesn't expect any silver bullet solutions from the Free Press.

"We've met with them many times and they just refuse to get the facts straight," he said. "I've told them that I'm not going to write in to the paper anymore because they can't do these things the right way. It's fine if you want to have a debate based on facts, but the Free Press has chosen not to be too concerned about facts."