

Neighbors fight, states scramble over clean power

October 9, 2007

Story Highlights

- Wind turbine triggers court fight in historic Atlanta, Georgia, neighborhood
- States set deadlines which spur scramble to create cleaner energy
- Shifting infrastructure sparks questions about who controls project locations
- Sen. Kennedy rejects facility near home; Washington state overrules county

ATLANTA, Georgia (CNN) -- Curt Mann's neighbors are livid, accusing him of erecting an ugly wind turbine among their historic homes for no other reason than to show off his environmental "bling."

The 49-year-old residential developer is remodeling his 1920s house to be more environmentally friendly, including installation of a 45-foot-tall wind turbine in his front yard. "It's really none of their business how I spend my money," Mann said.

The towering turbine, which overlooks majestic trees and Victorian rooftops, pits preservationists in Atlanta's Grant Park Historic District against a property owner and his individual rights.

"It's unattractive and it's a nuisance," said Scott Herzinger, whose home is three doors down. Mann "invaded the public view ... when he put that tower up."

In blustery regions, home turbines can cut power bills by up to 80 percent. But opponents claim Mann's wind turbine needlessly threatens neighborhood property values because Atlanta's low winds don't produce enough speed to make the device worthwhile.

At a cost of \$15,000, Mann said the turbine will shave at least \$20 per month off his power bill -- hardly a windfall. A proposed federal tax credit would bring Mann \$3,000. Acknowledging it could be decades before his investment pays off, Mann said, "even if it was a 50-year payback, at least we've done something to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels."

Herzinger blames Atlanta, which "let us down miserably" when zoning officials sided



A neighbor posted a protest sign against Curt Mann's 45-foot wind turbine in Atlanta, Georgia.

with Mann.

Said Mann, "If regulations for historic preservation don't address modern-day issues, then they're not very sound."

But Herzinger, 48, who shares Mann's support for wind power, said Mann could have considered many alternatives which would have helped the environment more than the turbine. "After looking at the facts, it doesn't seem unreasonable to think of Mann's wind turbine as eco-bling."



The Wild Horse turbines are near a proposed facility that was rejected by Kittitas County, Washington.

Although opponents filed a lawsuit in Fulton County Superior Court against both Atlanta and Mann, the squabble poses larger, far-reaching questions about how communities, states and the nation as a whole should tackle the ongoing shift toward cleaner energy.

"I don't think we're going to revolutionize the utility industry through wind turbines in the front yard," said longtime California energy consultant Nancy Rader. "To really make a dent in the power sector we've got to have the big, central, bulk-generating facilities."

At least 21 states and the District of Columbia have set deadlines or goals for utilities to obtain electricity from clean renewable sources instead of fossil-fuel burning plants.

The scramble has triggered construction of large-scale wind farms throughout much of the nation, including proposals for the first U.S. offshore facilities.

Delaware and Galveston, Texas, have offshore projects in the works, although a farm proposed off New York's Long Island was shelved this year due to high projected construction costs.

Top New York energy official Paul Tonko said the push toward renewable energy became more urgent as oil prices hit a record \$80 a barrel September 13.

"We have precious little time to adjust," said Tonko, president of New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. "We are behind the curve of several leading nations who have moved forward with very aggressive outcomes."

In Massachusetts, where utilities are under the gun to obtain four percent of electricity from renewables by 2009, builders await federal approval of a hugely controversial wind farm off historic Cape Cod.

The Cape Wind project envisions 130 wind turbines each rising 440 feet above Nantucket Sound by 2011. State officials said the farm will eliminate pollution equal to 175,000 gas-burning cars.

Like Mann's neighbors, Cape Wind opponents are rallying to protect historic properties. The Massachusetts historical commission said the wind farm's "visual elements" would be "out of character" and would have an "adverse effect" on more than a dozen historic sites, including the Kennedy family residential compound in Hyannis Port.



Cape Wind says its turbines would appear small on the horizon, as seen in this rendering.

James E. Liedell, director of Clean Power Now, a grass-roots group that supports the project, said he once asked Sen. Edward Kennedy, during a random encounter in 2003, what he thought of Cape Wind." 'It's the sight of wind turbines that bothers me,' " Liedell said Kennedy said, reminding Liedell that, " 'that's where I sail, and I don't want to see them when I sail either.' "

According to polling in northern Europe where wind farms are flourishing, residents eventually have come to accept turbine towers dotting the landscape, said Dr. Mike Pasqualetti, who has done much research on the topic. Communities near many California wind farms, which were built in the 1980s, have largely come to accept the turbines, said the Arizona State University professor.

As the nation's fastest growing form of new power generation, wind-born electricity may soon fuel commutes for millions of Americans.

"If we power electric hybrid cars with electricity that comes from wind farms, it means you aren't polluting on either end of the equation," said Dr. Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. "It doesn't make sense to power electric cars with electricity from fossil fuel burning plants."

Governments should consider offering property owners reduced energy rates or other incentives to win their support for green energy projects, suggested Lang.

Washington state utilities are racing to obtain 15 percent renewable energy by 2020 -- much of that from wind. When the Kittitas County Commission unanimously rejected placing a 65-turbine facility near residential property, Gov. Chris Gregoire overruled the commissioners in a move that Chairman Alan Crankovich called disappointing and unprecedented.

"To have a land-use decision overturned by the governor, that scares me," Crankovich said. "I'm concerned about it because this is the first step in weakening local authority and I hope she understands that."

Bertha Morrison, 89, a lifelong resident whose property abuts the proposed site applauded the governor's decision. "There'll be money coming from it to the county and that will keep our taxes down a little bit."

Individuals such as Morrison, Mann and Herzinger can influence public energy policy, said energy consultant Rader, by participating in local government and casting votes on statewide initiatives.

"We're going to have to bite the bullet," said Rader. "I think we need to do every damn thing we can to save this planet and everybody on it."