

The Cape Codder

Clean energy advocates look 'beyond Cape Wind'

By Doreen Leggett
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Knowledge is power, and a group of advocates are hoping that with more information Cape residents will wield greater control over their future as it relates to energy.

A number of people, from myriad interest groups, gathered at the Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Reserve last week to put "community" back in the energy equation, and to have residents involved in planning a switch to a sustainable energy future.

"Energy impacts so much of our daily lives, from the food that we eat to transportation," said Greg Watson, of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative and facilitator of the discussion. "It is sort of like a linchpin, if you can have a positive impact on shaping your energy future, or exercising your energy options, it can effect many aspects of the overall quality of life on Cape Cod."

The forum was called "Beyond Cape Wind," as the collaborative hopes to harness some of the energy that has been generated by the proposal to build 130 wind turbines in Nantucket Sound, to broaden the discussion of adopting a cleaner and greener energy supply for the Cape.

The first step in the quest is to develop knowledge briefs that outline the "true costs" of the region's dependence on fossil fuels.

"A lot of times people just look at how much they pay for gasoline or oil and they aren't looking beyond at the health cost or the environmental costs," said Joan Muller, the education coordinator for Waquoit Bay.

By laying out those costs, and the current energy picture of the Cape, residents can decide where they want to go, and how to get there. The forum, which was spearheaded by Cape & Islands Renewable Energy Collaborative and organized by Chris Powicki of Cummaquid's Water Energy & Ecology Information Services, has also created a survey to better gauge community opinion.

Maggie Geist, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod and a participant in the forum, said there is a lot at stake. And people have been disconnected from their energy sources for so long, it's going to take a real change in thinking.

"We have had, for many years, very inexpensive energy and it typically gets produced very far away," she said. But now, people are in agreement that climate change is happening and it is a result of our dependence on fossil fuels, and that energy prices are rising, and that our dependence on conventional energy sources doesn't always make the best foreign policy. People are ready to make changes, and the intent of the collaborative is to point out opportunities, organizers say.

Geist said that the demand for energy is so high that she doubts we can build our way out. Twenty years from now, our electricity needs will be 46 percent above what they are right now.

"That should be a wake up call for every single person. I don't believe you can build enough power plants to meet that demand," she said.

And with a "federal government that seems incapable of putting together a reasonable energy policy," it's up to local efforts, she said. And those local efforts include everything from energy efficiency programs, to buying cars that use less gasoline.

And individual choices will impact the Cape as a whole.

Watson said energy choices here, and across the country, could have impacts on the Cape's economy, which is dependent on tourism. Not only do the discharge of fossil fuel plants, including nitrates, effect water quality, but even "in the broadest sense, as gas prices go up and up and up people start to think twice," about coming to the Cape, he said.

The collaborative is working with MIT/USGS Science Impact Collaborative (MUSIC) to model how electricity and fuels are supplied to, purchased and used by Cape and island consumers and how they are connected to environmental, social and economic issues.

The briefs, with support from technology collaborative, will present scientific information on the effects of the fossil-fuel based energy economy on local and regional concerns such as cost of living, business competitiveness, air pollution, eutrophication, wildlife and habitat, health risks and climate change. To fill out the survey log onto <http://web.mit.edu/amostash/www/CIREC/SURVEY.htm>.