

TILTING

Don Quixote must be in seventh heaven.

With the release of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Cape Wind project by the Minerals Management Service of the Department of Interior and the scheduling of public hearings on that statement, the concept of tilting at windmills has been taken to a new level.

We know that governmental agencies are not infallible and that the current administration in Washington has shown a strong business bias when it comes to environmental matters. Nonetheless, the project has been through two separate and independent reviews, first with the Army Corps of Engineers and now with MMSI, with essentially the same outcome.

The message is simple: The proposed Cape Wind windfarm on Horseshoe Shoal does not present a significant environmental hazard to fish, birds or people. Further, the proposed Cape Wind windfarm does not propose a significant navigational risk to boats or airplanes.

These are the points, together with the aesthetic concerns, which have been the mainstay of the arguments against the windfarm. And these are the points which are being polished up and rolled out again in advance of the hearings that are part of MMSI's 60-day comment period. (The hearing on Nantucket will be held on March 11.)

In response, the project's proponents are reloading their guns with the ammunition of clean, renewable energy and a lessened dependence on foreign oil. The Cape Wind effort is viewed by some in the power industry as the prototype for future projects.

For the next week, everyone on Nantucket will be bombarded in any way possible with the pros and cons of the project, as we were prior to the vote on the non-binding ballot question a couple of years ago. The hearing will be mobbed. (One has to wonder what in the human psyche makes an issue of this sort attract hundreds, if not thousands, of very opinionated people while the possibility of having wind generators in various locations around the island (seemingly only gets the attention of a handful.)

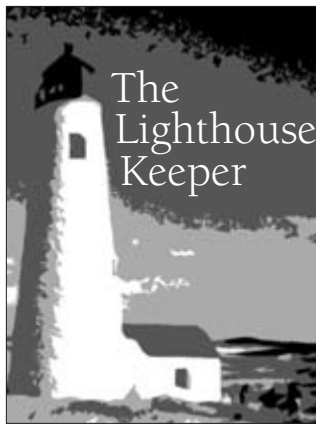
Let us assume for the moment, that when all is said and done, the final environmental impact statement is issued in a form much as it is today and Cape Wind continues through the permitting process. Is that the end of it? Most likely, it is not. There will probably be lawsuits and appeals and whatever other delaying tactics may be conceived.

And this is where the good Don may well get his lance caught in the sail of the windmill. In fact, it may be stuck there already.

It has been seven years since the windfarm in Nantucket Sound was first proposed. During that time, electricity prices for Cape and Islands residents have skyrocketed — and so have construction costs.

One of the arguments in favor of the project has always been that it will reduce the cost of power, but that point of view is coming under increasing scrutiny. In fact, the new mantra of the opposition is that, when all is said and done, the cost of power from the windfarm will, at today's rates, be 50 percent higher than the cost of power from conventional sources. One consultant says the price of Cape Wind's electricity will be double the cost of current power rates.

Maybe so. Maybe not. MMSI seems to think the project is still economically viable, but since the beginning of construction, under optimum circumstances, is two to three years away, who really knows? What is now a \$900 billion dollar project could become much more expensive —



BY DANIEL W. DRAKE
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

and the price of oil could be \$150 per barrel.

As a commentator in "EnergyBiz," a mouthpiece of the power industry, pointed out a couple of weeks ago, after the release of the MMSI draft report, ultimately the economics of the project will be the test of its viability. Before it will be able to start construction, Cape Wind will have to have in hand a contract to sell its power. If it is unable to produce power competitive in price with that from other power suppliers, it will not be able to get any power supply contracts and "... then the project would collapse under its own weight."

The opponents of Cape Wind have played an extremely important role in the discussions, raising issues which needed to be considered and which otherwise might not have received the necessary attention. But now, after they have their say one more time during the current hearings, it becomes time for them to back off.

Sources of electricity have become among the most important issues facing our country. At some point soon, if we want to reduce the contribution to greenhouse gases and lessen our dependence on the volatile foreign suppliers of oil, we have to find other ways of making those turbines go around. Time is wasting!

Because of escalating costs, Nantucket has lost out on an offshore buoy to unload petroleum products for a new tank farm proposed for a site adjacent to the airport. Instead, tanker trucks laden with gasoline, heating oil and aviation fuel will continue to wend their way through the narrow streets of downtown in a way that may be less safe than rehabilitating the present tank farm behind the Grand Union.

By the same token, the longer it takes to make up our minds about our own land-based windfarm, the less economically beneficial it may become.

We have had seven years of press releases and hearings on the Cape Wind project. While some of that was essential, the only thing that really has changed over the elapsed time is the cost of the project.

If the project does collapse under its own weight, there will be nothing to show for it. We will not have an alternate source of power. There will not be a windfarm that a majority of people on the Cape say they want. There will not be a power source that 84 percent of the people of Massachusetts say they want. There will be no eyesore — or great tourist attraction. There will be no jobs. And, all the while, we will watch the price of oil and coal climb higher and higher and our shores continue to disappear.

Once again, tilting at windmills will be equated with Pyrrhic victories. ■

The "Lighthouse Keeper" reflects the views of the author and does not represent the editorial position of The Nantucket Independent. Please send any ideas or comments to drake@nantucketindependent.com.

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