

First District lawmakers back local group's windmill plan

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Published: Friday, August 01, 2008

LOWER TOWNSHIP - First District legislators on Thursday gave their support to a Cape May County fishing consortium in competition to build windmills off the coast of New Jersey.

Cape May's Fishermen's Energy of New Jersey is one of five firms competing for as much as \$19 million in state grants for a wind-turbine project that would generate about 350 megawatts - about 64 percent more electricity than is generated at the coal-fired B.L. England power plant in Upper Township.

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, said Thursday's news conference with Fisherman's Energy will have no formal effect on the decision of the state Board of Public Utilities. But local legislators support the different approach of the fishermen's group, he said.

He said he backed the fishermen's group because their proposal included a pilot program that would place eight turbines in state waters - about three miles southeast of Atlantic City - that could generate a combined 20 megawatts. Construction could begin as early as 2010.

Because it would require fewer approvals, this pilot project could begin several years earlier and allow for earlier environmental studies, which could expedite their second-phase project to place 66 turbines farther out in the ocean in federal waters, Van Drew said.

Other groups' proposals for turbines are located in federal waters, he said.

"We support the concept of windmills in our district and along coastal New Jersey.

We support the concept of doing a pilot project first to evaluate any environmental or tourism effect, and finally we support the concept of doing it within New Jersey waters, so we can get the evaluation done more quickly, so we can get larger projects done more quickly," Van Drew said.

Democratic Assemblymen Nelson Albano and Matt Milam, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, also backed the proposal.

Thursday's news conference at the Lobster House in Lower Township comes shortly after state Board of Public Utilities decided it would not sign off on an offshore windmill project until at least Oct. 2 to give project reviewers more time to ask developers more questions.

A previous deadline had been set for August, when an offshore wind evaluation committee would have brought the board a recommendation based on the five proposals, said Doyal Siddell, BPU spokesman.

The evaluation committee can also decide to make no award if it does not receive an acceptable proposal.

Fisherman's Energy's proposal to build eight turbines in state waters would cost about \$100 million, said Daniel Cohen, president of the group and of Atlantic Cape Fisheries in Cape May.

The full proposal for 74 turbines overall would cost more than \$1 billion, he said.

Among the other companies vying to build New Jersey's first off-shore windmills is Bluewater Wind, of Hoboken, which proposes building 116 windmills 15.5 miles southeast of Atlantic City. Bluewater's parent company built the five windmills at the Atlantic County Utilities Authority.

New Jersey imports as much as 20 percent of its electricity and has a new Energy Master Plan that calls for getting 20 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2020.