

Bodett named to state energy commission

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DUMMERSTON -- As the owner of a home that produces more power than it uses, Tom Bodett has a keen interest in energy issues.

Now, he'll be part of statewide discussion about how Vermont decides where its electric-generation projects can be built and the public's role in those sometimes contentious discussions.

The Dummerston resident and Selectboard member was appointed this week to serve on the governor's Energy Generation Siting Policy Commission and already has participated in his first meeting.

"I'm honored and excited to be invited to participate in making policy recommendations to the governor that might affect the Vermont landscape and energy future for generations to come," Bodett said.

Bodett was named to replace commission member Jim Matteau, a Windham County resident who resigned "to undertake important FEMA duties in New Jersey in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy," state officials said.

Bodett said he has worked with Matteau, former director of Windham Regional Commission.

"We corresponded about this very issue, particularly how the siting of renewable energy generators -- solar, wind, biomass -- should interact with local town planning and zoning," Bodett said in an e-mail to the Reformer. "This was of some interest to me as our new town plan was being developed for Dummerston."

Local input is part of the issue being examined by the commission, which was formed by order of Gov. Peter Shumlin on Oct. 2. The group is supposed to survey best practices for siting electric-generation projects and report back to Shumlin by April 30.

In a letter announcing Bodett's appointment, Vermont Department of Public Service Commissioner Elizabeth Miller noted a rising number of energy-generation applications as well as the state's plan to greatly increase its use of renewable energy.

"To achieve that vision, we must have processes for in-state permitting and approvals that create public trust," Miller wrote.

She added that "I expect the commission will consider whether Vermont can improve the manner of public participation, including town or regional representation, in the approval process."

At the commission's second meeting on Wednesday, Bodett said commissioners heard from representatives from New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

"Our focus was on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their permitting processes," Bodett said.

He added that commissioners "will be hearing from several more states at future meetings as well as stakeholders and, of course, there is public participation all along."

Bodett acknowledged "something of a steep learning curve." But he commended his fellow commissioners and

said he is expected to bring his local-government experience -- he's in his seventh year on Dummerston's Selectboard -- to the energy talks.

"I've been asked to bring a local perspective to our deliberations -- to use my experiences in local government to imagine and anticipate where the problems might be," Bodett said.

He is well aware of recent controversies regarding commercial wind power in Vermont, including a potential project in the towns of Windham and Grafton. But Bodett noted that "our charge is not to compare technologies and make judgments on which is bad, good, better or best. Our job is to examine the current regulatory process and determine if it can be improved upon."

He added that he is interested in renewable energy both as a public official and as a private resident.

"Being the owner of three large rows of solar panels which my gracious neighbors have to look at, I have become very interested in the growing concern over 'green sprawl' which is taking place worldwide," Bodett said.

He defines that term as 'the visual and cultural impact of green energy technology on our landscape.'

"As a great believer in renewable energy generation, I understand that for it to be truly embraced and become a permanent part of our futures, we will have to be able to live with it," Bodett said. "Thoughtful siting through an open and effective public process is a way I believe we can accomplish that."

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