

Governor: Time for fresh look at how Vermont sites energy projects

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Amid growing local opposition to mountaintop wind projects in several Vermont communities, Gov. Peter Shumlin this week created a five-person commission to study the way energy plants are sited and approved in the state.

The commission, whose members include two former secretaries of Natural Resources and a former speaker of the Vermont House, is to recommend changes by April 30.

“It’s not that the process isn’t working now, but it was designed for far fewer projects at a different scale,” said Public Service Commissioner Elizabeth Miller, whose office represents the public interest in cases before the Public Service Board. “Why would we be afraid to look at ways to improve?”

Shumlin’s commission will look at the process for siting all types of electric generation.

The specific instructions to the commission, however, indicate that the Shumlin administration — which strongly supports renewable energy development in Vermont — has heard the growing chorus of complaints about the siting of mountaintop wind energy projects in particular.

New energy generating facilities in Vermont are approved by the state Public Service Board in a quasi-judicial procedure heavy on legal process and expert testimony. Approval or rejection can take many months or years.

Developers have concerns about the length and uncertainty of the process. Individuals and some communities opposed to wind energy development on specific ridgelines have complained that they do not have the financial resources to pay experts and hire lawyers to defend their interests.

“This whole concept of being a ‘host community’ is ridiculous — we didn’t invite them in. We feel we are being bulldozed, not being a host,” Michael Channon, chairman of the selectboard in the town of Newark, said recently of a wind energy project proposed for his town.

Among Shumlin’s charges to the Governor’s Energy Siting Policy Commission:

- Compare Vermont’s process, including timelines and approval criteria, with other states, particularly those in New England.

- Compare the opportunity for participation in the process by individuals, town governments and regional planners with procedures in other states.
- Analyze whether “Vermont’s criteria for electric generation project siting approval adequately protects Vermont’s lands, environmental resources and cultural resources,” when it comes to individual projects and the cumulative impact of multiple projects.
- Consider whether the state should develop generic siting guidelines to “provide guidance on environmental impacts, location, aesthetics and other common issues.”

The commission members, chosen by Miller, are: Scott Johnstone, executive director of the Vermont Energy Investment Corp. and a former Agency of Natural Resources secretary; Jan Eastman, a lawyer and former Agency of Natural Resources secretary; former Public Service Board Chairman Louise McCarren; former House Speaker Gaye Symington; and Jim Matteau, former executive director of the Windham Regional Commission.

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