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Aquinnah Selectmen Will Seek Bylaw to Regulate Energy Use

By IAN FEIN

With the energy demands of large homes a growing concern across the Island, Aquinnah selectmen this week unanimously endorsed a regulation that would require new homes over a certain size to include renewable energy sources such as solar panels or wind turbines.

"This is an important measure," selectman James Newman said at the regular board meeting on Tuesday, after proposing the energy requirement. "And I think that this community should be a leader on the issue."

Selectmen will ask the town planning board to place the proposed zoning bylaw amendment on the next town meeting warrant. The planning board is expected to discuss the proposal later this month.

Mr. Newman acknowledged yesterday that he had yet to seek an opinion from town counsel regarding the legality of the bylaw, but he said his main intent in proposing the regulation was to get people on the Island talking and thinking about their energy use. He said that he and his wife recently put solar panels on their Aquinnah home, and promptly cut their energy demand in half.

"I think we need to push the envelope," Mr. Newman said. "It's important that somebody direct this to happen, because people are not doing it on their own."

The Martha's Vineyard Commission earlier this year adopted its first energy policy, and commission members in recent months have focused more attention on energy mitigation when it comes to writing conditions of approval for developments of regional impact (DRIs). But the commission has immediate jurisdiction only over the DRIs that come before it.

Aquinnah has for some time been at the front of the pack in adopting progressive zoning regulations. It is currently the only community in the commonwealth with a substantive townwide district of critical planning concern (DCPC), a special overlay planning district enacted by town voters in 1999 under the enabling legislation of the commission.

Such critical districts allow Island towns - through the unique powers of the commission - to adopt zoning regulations that otherwise would not be permitted under state law. If approved by Aquinnah voters, the energy requirement would go to the commission for inclusion in the townwide DCPC regulations.

As proposed by Mr. Newman this week, the zoning bylaw amendment would mandate that any new home over 2,100 square feet install either solar panels or wind turbines that produce at least 2,500 kilowatt hours per year. That figure represents roughly one-third of the annual energy use of an average family of four on the Vineyard.

The Aquinnah proposal comes even as other Island residents are discussing the broader possibility of an Islandwide energy DCPC. Supporters say the energy district would allow the Vineyard to adopt special regulations to protect its regional energy sources.

Critical districts are intended to protect areas of particular regional importance and can cover a wide range of places, from coastal areas to rural roads. An energy DCPC would be the first on the Island that sought to protect a resource which is not also identifiable as a geographic area or site. Adoption of such a district would require a long public process of consideration, as well as approval from each town on the Vineyard.

Mr. Newman yesterday said he hoped that his proposal would spur leaders from other Island towns to start thinking about such energy regulations.

"I hope this influences other towns to act," Mr. Newman said. "And I want to see Aquinnah take the lead in that movement."

Vineyard Energy Project director Kate Warner yesterday praised Aquinnah selectmen for endorsing such a regulation. One of the energy DCPC supporters, Ms. Warner said that she, too, hopes other Island leaders start looking at ways they can encourage or enforce sustainable energy practices within their towns.

She also noted that voters in all six Island towns during the spring of 2005 approved a nonbinding resolution that pledged to work toward the goal of becoming a renewable energy Island. The resolution read, in part, that the citizens of the town intended to: "Promote energy efficiency and use of renewable energy sources through the careful revision of zoning bylaws, Martha's Vineyard Commission regulations and possible building codes."

"Every town passed that resolution," Ms. Warner said. "And this is a great first step by the Aquinnah selectmen toward that goal."

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