

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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MVC Approves Aquinnah Energy District

By JIM HICKEY

The Martha's Vineyard Commission on Monday voted without dissent to designate an energy district critical of planning concern in the town of Aquinnah, the first such district of its kind on the Island.

The town and the commission will now begin the process of drafting special townwide regulations for Aquinnah to promote alternative energy in new construction and establish guidelines for the placement of wind turbines, solar panels and geothermal systems.

A limited moratorium will also remain in place for any structure over 32 feet in height — which in practical terms means wind turbines.

Although commissioners and Aquinnah officials were a united front at Monday's meeting, rescheduled from last Thursday night due to inclement weather, there were some bumps in the road along the way. Some town officials — including selectmen Jim Newman and Camille Rose — differed over how special energy regulations should be created.

Ms. Rose, chairman of the board of selectmen, submitted an application to the commission on Oct. 31 to nominate the entire town as an energy district of critical planning concern (DCPC).

Ordinarily such a nomination would trigger an automatic building moratorium, but in this case the moratorium was modified to be more specific and less draconian. The intent was to put any proposals for wind turbines on hold while the town drafts regulations that balance the need for renewable energy with protecting the natural, open landscape of Aquinnah.

In her nomination to the commission, Ms. Rose wrote: "The residents of Aquinnah are eager to respond to a moral mandate to both conserve energy and create alternative energy sources. Given the sensitivity of our landscape, we recognize a need to manage our resources. Without a comprehensive plan or policy we may find that uncontrolled development [of renewable energy technologies], although well intentioned, might create havoc."

But Mr. Newman, who was out of the country when the nomination was filed, appeared before the commission on Dec. 6 to express concerns the plan had not been thoroughly vetted or explained to the public. He said a moratorium on wind turbines — even temporary — might send the wrong message about the town's commitment to renewable energy and perhaps derail projects already in the pipeline.

“I don’t think we should do this now because we don’t have our act together yet. I think we will actually be discouraging the construction of wind towers,” Mr. Newman said at the commission meeting two weeks ago.

He suggested the town could regulate wind turbines and other renewable energy technologies by amending town bylaws, and suggested the nomination be withdrawn from the commission.

In a letter to the commission dated Dec. 5, South Mountain Co., a West Tisbury building company that is involved in renewable energy technologies, also advised against the DCPC. “It would be very bad form — symbolically and practically — to start the process of creating an energy DCPC by placing a specific moratorium on wind turbines,” the letter states.

South Mountain principal Rob Myers confirmed this week that the company is involved in a wind turbine project with at least one property owner in Aquinnah that would be affected by the moratorium.

But over the course of the next two weeks and several meetings town officials gradually reached a consensus that the town needed the expertise and resources of the commission.

In the end, debate at the town level quieted, and on Monday the energy district was approved 12-0 with two abstentions.

“This is a model of how to proceed in the future,” said commission member Katherine Newman of Aquinnah, whose husband is Jim Newman the selectman.

The town now has a year to complete regulations for the district, which will need to be approved by the commission and by voters at town meeting. Town officials have already said they hope to expedite the process and have draft regulations finished within six months.

Aquinnah is also the only town on the Vineyard that has adopted a townwide district of critical planning concern. Approved in 1999, district regulations among other things prohibit construction over 24 feet without a special permit. The approval of any wind turbines in town would require a modification of the existing DCPC regulations, which would also trigger a temporary moratorium.

On Monday commissioners emphasized the need to protect the natural beauty and rural character of Aquinnah while also promoting renewable energy. Although the town, with its windswept coastal moors, is often cited as having perfect conditions for wind turbines, the same conditions make its scenic vistas especially vulnerable to despoliation from development.

“You have arguably one of the most beautiful spots on the Island, and perhaps the country here. We want the town to be innovative, but we also want to protect what is so special and unique,” MVC chairman Douglas Sederholm said.

Draft guidelines approved by the commission underscore the need to protect this unusual place, situated on the extreme westernmost edge of the Vineyard. One section calls for identifying potential locations for wind turbines, while also identifying significant public views and setting priorities. The guidelines also call for considering any risk to wildlife and natural habitats.

Another section calls for establishing measures to ensure that any new construction will minimize reliance on fossil fuels; another calls for the town to consider building utility-scale wind turbines that might supply energy to other parts of the Island. The last section calls for integrating and balancing the goals of the energy district with the goals of the existing townwide DCPC.

Several commissioners said the energy district may mark a pivotal moment in the energy conservation movement on the Island, and more than one cited the special enabling legislation that created the commission more than 30 years ago.

“The whole idea of the [legislation] was to protect what is unique and special about the Vineyard,” Mr. Sederholm said. “This is not technically what a protection district was intended to do, but it is no less important . . . and certainly within our legal scope.”

Other commissioners expanded on Mr. Sederholm’s comments, framing them against global issues like climate change and rising sea levels.

“This district is a way to help protect our air,” commissioner Richard Toole said.

“And maybe keep the Island from eventually going underwater,” added commissioner Mimi Davisson.

The role call vote was as follows: Voting in favor of the energy DCPC were Linda Sibley, Mimi Davisson, Peter Cabana, Christina Brown, Paul Strauss, Douglas Sederholm, Jim Powell, Ned Orleans, Susan Shea, James Athearn, Katherine Newman and Richard Toole. Chris Murphy and Andrew Woodruff, who had not attended every session on the DCPC, abstained.