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Aquinnah Selectmen Pull Plug On Pioneering Energy District

By SAM BUNGEY

In a move which acknowledges almost a year of bureaucratic missteps, Aquinnah selectmen have announced their plan to scrap an energy district of critical planning concern, created to help push through a pioneering bylaw on wind turbines.

But those involved have voiced a determination not to give up on an initiative praised as much for its concept as it was damned for its presentation during multiple appearances on the town meeting floor over the past year.

Earlier this week selectman Camille Rose scheduled a hearing to rescind the energy district with the Martha's Vineyard Commission for Sept. 16. If approved, it will end the energy district and lift the building moratorium.

However Ms. Rose, who has been a key player throughout, was absent from a meeting last Thursday at which the remaining selectmen voted to scrap the energy district and selectman Jim Newman announced the formation of a new group to refine the bylaw language to meet voter needs.

Designated last December by the Martha's Vineyard Commission, the energy district gave Aquinnah the autonomy to adopt its own set of regulations concerning both private and communal wind energy development.

Though approved by the commission, an energy bylaw was rejected outright at an Aquinnah annual town meeting in June and indefinitely postponed by dissatisfied voters at a special town meeting earlier this month.

In the absence of an approved bylaw, the district would expire in December. By ending the district the town will also lift a moratorium on building that has been in effect since May as a requirement of the district.

Speaking this week Ms. Rose argued that by introducing the project to Aquinnah and to the Island at large, the energy district has done its job.

“Our district [a townwide district of critical planning concern] has the same weight [as the energy district] and we’ve done all the introductory effort at this point,” said Ms. Rose. Through its own district, the town could arguably adopt the bylaw without reapplying to the commission for a separate energy district.

Meanwhile, the project is involving an ever-increasing range of players. At a meeting last week Mr. Newman announced a new informal group of around eight Aquinnah residents and visitors who will work to make the bylaw more palatable.

He said the group’s focus will be to simplify language in the 16-page document.

“We want to make it totally understandable, simplify it and bring it to the community,” said Mr. Newman, speaking earlier this week from New York.

He said selectmen will hold several public meetings on the changes, publicly post the changes and send out a mass e-mail to town residents, all an effort to address the disappointment expressed by voters at a perceived lack of public involvement in the process.

The group already includes Peter Temple, a planning board member who helped write the energy bylaw, and James Pickman, a Washington-based business consultant.

“There are several attorneys [in the group], they’re all volunteers,” Mr. Newman said.

However, he confirmed that the group does not include either selectman Camille Rose or planning board member Carlos Montoya, who as a pair have been the driving force for the project to date.

“I spent nine months working on it I think maybe it’s time to step back and allow fresh voices,” said Ms. Rose. “If they can come up with something easier to understand, that’s more palatable.”

A second front appeared to have developed yesterday when an e-mail written by Mr. Temple and sent to Aquinnah residents announced the planning board will hold a strategy session on how to best get public comment and restructure the wind bylaw. The meeting will be held Monday at 8 a.m. at the town hall.

Public discussion at last month’s special town meeting was largely confined to process and rarely got to the substance of the bylaw. However early in the meeting former selectman Jeffrey Madison characterized as autocratic some sections of the regulations attached to applying for private wind turbines. Ms. Rose countered that any regulations were there to protect the town, arguing that Aquinnah is more stringently regulated, and therefore less developed than other

Island towns.

“As long as I feel the protection of the town is still in place I don’t care,” she told the Gazette.

There is widespread support for action on alternative energy in Aquinnah. At the special town meeting voters approved a conceptual article supporting the ongoing investigation of community wind. Mr. Newman said he was unaware of the current status of communal wind.

“If things are being done they’re not talking about it,” said Mr. Newman.

Ms. Rose confirmed that work continues on the communal wind, though the scope of work is limited at this stage.

“Believe me it’s still very active,” she said, adding that several areas of town land are being looked at as possible sites for a wind tower. “But we can’t do much until we get the regulation,” she said.

The existing bylaw focuses purely on wind turbines and would accompany an energy district of critical planning concern for Aquinnah, which is the only Island town with its own townwide district of critical planning concern. It includes regulation on both communal wind energy development and for residential turbine construction. State law requires that the two be enacted together.

The bylaw is part of a broader plan to develop and regulate alternative energy in Aquinnah which would include solar and energy efficient building methods.

“We can go back to the Martha’s Vineyard Commission if necessary [to reinstate the energy district] but not until the town embraces it would I go back,” Mr. Newman said.

However, he said he hopes the project ultimately acquires a wider scope.

“My goal is to have an all-Island energy bylaw, I said that several years ago,” he said.