

The winds of change

US approval of turbine project puts state on track to joining Denmark in democratizing energy

THE FEDERAL approval of Cape Wind has Gregory Watson, the state's senior adviser for clean energy technology, hoping this is a sea change beyond renewable energy. He sees it as a bold attempt to democratize energy.

In his years before joining the Patrick administration, when he was a sustainable energy advocate with the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, Watson made a point of saying how fossil fuel industry plants and storage facilities were often placed in or near low-income neighborhoods, while wealthier communities were spared the view and the stench. Wind power, he said, was an equalizer, because turbine location is dictated by where Mother Nature puts the wind.

Cape Wind was delayed for years because the wealthy, most notably the Kennedys, exempted themselves from the movement toward clean energy. At the last minute, Native American tribes said turbines would disturb their cultural and historical heritage. In between, birders, boaters, beachcombers, and fishermen all concocted a spiral of unfounded reasons how turbines would destroy their way of life. Never mind that ever since Edison and Bell, we have compromised our view of the American landscape with our conduits of utility and energy.

Watson, who has long tried to effect cultural

shifts, whether in energy independence or in inner city empowerment when he ran the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, thinks Nantucket Sound will ultimately become just another Copenhagen harbor. Two years ago, he toured the Middelgrunden wind farm there, a string of turbines 2 miles long and only a mile offshore from the city. Denmark's wind turbines now produce 20 percent of its electricity. The United States gets only 1.8 percent of its electricity from wind power.

"People told me was that, sure, at the beginning, there was some initial resistance to the unknown," Watson said this week after US Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's Boston press conference to announce Cape Wind's approval. "There was concern about the view. But there isn't that much wild space in Denmark so people find it much more natural to have working landscapes or working seascapes. They were somewhat perplexed with American attitudes about wilderness and wild spaces like oceans, that somehow energy conservation can't coexist with it. They told me, 'You love this notion of wildness, but you don't get it on sustainable development.'"

President Obama and Energy Secretary Steven Chu have praised Denmark's leadership in wind. Salazar cited his own tour of Middelgrunden during his Copenhagen climate conference speech in December. Governor Deval Patrick singled out Denmark at the Cape Wind press conference with

Salazar. Afterward, Patrick added, "I have some Danish friends who write me that the jobs are real and instead of the turbines destroying tourism, boats are taking people out to look at them."

Instead of turbines destroying an idealized way of life, they are gently turning symbols of sharing a new connection to energy. In a trip to Denmark and north Germany last month, turbines were not only visible on the sea. They spin over bucolic farms, on the outskirts of well-manicured and beautifully gardened towns, and near bike paths. They are in clear view from tourist waterfront promenades and through hotel windows. For the poor or privileged, turbines are part of life. As far as disturbing cultural heritage, it was particularly striking to cycle and jog by churches dating to 1324, with views of turbines right behind. Americans have nothing on that visual contrast.

The German family we stayed with was also perplexed about American resistance to offshore windpower. They said there is a sense of pride about turbines and now pay no more attention to them than the old utility pole. Watson heard the same thing and said such sentiments now take on even more importance. "Especially when you consider what is going on right now in the Gulf of Mexico [the current oil leak] or Appalachia [the recent coal mine tragedy]," he said.

Denmark went from resisting the unknown to becoming a global leader of alternative energy. Cape Wind's approval is a call for Americans who jealously guard their view of the water to drop their resistance so we do not fall hopelessly behind.

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