

Wind turbine assertions are ‘undocumented and speculative’

After reading a number of letters to the *Press* questioning the Town Council’s judgment in approving only one site, Taylor Point, for the proposed sighting of a wind turbine, I feel that I need to dispel some of the rumors, myths and misrepresentations in the letters and a committee member’s resignation letter. The views expressed here are my own and do not represent the views of the council as a whole.

I appreciate the work that the Wind Energy Committee has done to bring us to a point that we can move from study to implementation. The Town Council is unanimously behind the concept of erecting a turbine or turbines.

The Wind Energy Committee’s first recommendation at the Feb. 1 Town Council meeting was for a turbine at Ft. Getty, but that they “would also support a turbine at Taylor Point if that is the site the Town Council selects.”

The committee also listed the following advantages to the Ft. Getty site: Possibility of expansion; aesthetically pleasing site; unquestioned ability to generate more revenue than Taylor Point due to higher wind speeds; potential to improve the Ft. Getty road vista by placing the interconnection underground; minimal interference with the current and projected uses of the park; likely to be more profitable than Taylor Point; and greater visibility as a public accomplishment. The committee recommended erecting one turbine at Ft. Getty at the Feb. 1 meeting and the council deadlocked – two votes for and two votes against – with discussion indicating a reluctance to install a turbine at Ft. Getty at this time.

After reviewing the committee’s report and the Wind Power Feasibility Study prepared by Applied Science Associates Inc., I had concerns about siting a turbine or turbines at Ft. Getty, which I made public.

First, we have a Master Plan for Ft. Getty that envisions a number of uses for the park. While being approved by previous councils, that plan has yet to be implemented. I have stated that I would like to make implementation of the plan a priority. I believe that building a turbine at the park at this time would be a disservice to the town and all users of the park by focusing energy on construction of a turbine to the detriment of rehabilitation of the park. The Wind Energy Committee inferred “possible expansion” – are they already envisioning turning Ft. Getty into a wind farm?

I also have concerns about the interconnectivity issues at Ft. Getty. The park is currently serviced by a single-phase circuit. In order to connect a turbine to the electric grid, we would need to replace all of the poles along Ft. Getty Road and add three-phase circuit wires at additional costs. The Wind Energy Committee recommended undergrounding the cable and offered an estimate of approximately \$400,000 (at the second hearing on Feb. 16). The cost of under-grounding these cables takes away any advantages of perceived energy production. I say perceived because the Feasibility Study reports that the difference between the average annual wind speeds between Ft. Getty and Taylor Point is minimal.

During our Feb. 1 meeting, I specifically asked the committee if we could apply for grant monies for both locations. The answer that I received was “no.” The committee felt that, since both turbines relied on the same modeling and were proposed by one entity, constructing both would be considered one project and funded by one grant.

At the second meeting, they disregarded their first comments and pushed for a two-turbine, separate funding model. The committee could also not answer a basic question about the cost model during our first meeting – they could not answer whether the model accounted for electrical usage by the town or not. It took them until the second meeting to determine that the model was based on costs and revenues from the project only, and did not include current electrical usage costs.

I do not believe that not building a turbine at Ft. Getty now will prevent us from erecting another turbine at the park or another location in the future if we so choose. Nationally, we are in the initial stages of an energy production conversion from fossil fuels toward renewable energy sources. I don't believe that we will never have another opportunity for grant funding to help defray the costs of construction for a future project.

I do believe that this is not the right time to “force” a turbine at Ft. Getty – because of the costs of interconnectivity and moving forward on the implementation of the Ft. Getty Master Plan.

Based on the anticipated growth of the wind turbine industry in Rhode Island, nationally, and globally, it is certain that pricing of these multi-million dollar projects will inevitably change. As the industry matures, and production and siting capacity grows and becomes more competitive, costs may come down measurably. Assertions by the committee that we are losing a one-time window of opportunity to reduce net costs by erecting two turbines at once are both undocumented and speculative.

The voters of Jamestown will have an opportunity to decide whether or not you wish to support the proposed single turbine at Taylor Point when you vote on bond financing. Nothing about the process thus far has been “undemocratic.” You elected the Town Council to make tough decisions and we are doing so.

I welcome any discussion about this project and other issues affecting the town. My number and email are available on the Town website.

Michael Schnack
President
Jamestown Town Council