WIND POWER DEVELOPMENT IN NEW YORK... WHERE?

When you take a close and careful look at the land mass of New York State it is clear to see that the potential for large scale wind development is very limited. We persist with aggressive efforts under State renewable energy goals to build out onshore wind power . But when you consider honestly where that is likely or even possible to happen, much less fair, it is realistically very constrained, and highly suspect from the standpoint of environmental justice.

For both commonsense and fairness we should start by looking at where in New York additional electric power generation is needed, and particularly where clean power is needed. The answer to that question is clearly downstate.

Should not then all open space in downstate areas be utilized first for new generation sites? If the State is reluctant to override what it knows will be intense local opposition in the New York City area, Long Island and the Hudson Valley, where the power is needed and where existing generation is primarily fossil fueled, then it is indisputably the case that the State has essentially accepted the reality of a redlining practice that grants open season for developers to target certain economically challenged upstate areas – areas where the power generation is already clean and not needed, and where the populace lacks the economic power to fight back convincingly against development of those projects.

This is de facto energy redlining of New York – marking off for unprecedentedly intrusive (big, loud and ugly) industrial development, areas of the State that have marginal political clout based on socio/economic factors more than anything else.

Let's scan the map of New York. Let's break down the potential for wind power development (on land) in New York State on a county by county basis.

The yellow shaded areas (think of yellow as the color for warning) of the attached map identify the counties, or portions of counties, that are far more vulnerable – with many localized exceptions, of course, such as proximity to a small or medium city, airport, wildlife preserve, national forest or a sizable lake, etc.. (Otsego County is vulnerable, but the Cooperstown vicinity within Otsego County is not.)

The map identifies, in the unshaded portions, the areas of New York that are (not officially) but effectively off limits to wind power development – mostly for socio-economic-political reasons.

There are 62 counties in New York State. Start with the 5 counties that make up the City of New York: New York County, Bronx County, Kings County, Queens County and Richmond County.

Obviously no viability for large scale wind power here. No open land and very densely populated.

Now we are down to 57 counties.

Strike off another 2 counties immediately to the east. Nassau and Suffolk counties cover most of Long Island which sticks out into the ocean. Ocean breezes over the Island are significant but wind power on Long Island will never happen. Aside from the fact that most of Long Island is covered with development, Long Islanders would never allow large wind farms on what open space there is. Concerns over scenic preservation and property value retention would absolutely block any suggestion of a large wind farm. Forget about it. Total NIMBY.

Now we're down to 55 counties.

Moving northward into the greater Hudson Valley including the northern suburbs of the metro area and the Catskill Park area there is a de facto wind power no-go zone that stretches north to Albany and east/west from Connecticut and Massachusetts on the east to New Jersey and Pennsylvania on the west. This big area includes the counties of Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess, Columbia and Rensselaer counties on the east side of the Hudson River extending up to the Albany area.

On the west side of the Hudson River the counties of Rockland, Orange, Ulster, Greene and Albany extend northward to greater Albany. Further west are the counties of Sullivan, Delaware and Schoharie. (Portions of the Catskill Park are in Ulster, Sullivan, Delaware, and Greene counties.)

Delaware and Schoharie counties extend a significant distance westward away from the Hudson River and the Catskills, and include a lot of rural land and small towns, but they are still physically, culturally, demographically, and socio-economically more connected to the greater Hudson Valley area than the Southern Tier counties beginning with Broome County to their west. (There are significant numbers of weekenders and transplants from the downstate Metro area in Delaware and Schoharie counties.)

The greater Hudson Valley is not just well-to-do bedroom communities. It is a mix of suburban and rural. Agriculture is widely present. Prosperity levels vary. There are high elevations in the area where wind turbines could capture prevailing winds. But it will never happen. Forces to kill any such idea would form up quickly. A combination of environmental, scenic protection, property value protection (This whole area includes a lot of weekend retreats and vacation homes.) would combine to nix any proposal immediately.

No wind developer has ever ventured into the area. Enough said.

Now we're down to 42 counties.

Schenectady County next to Albany County is small and part of the same metro area with Albany. There is no open area in Schenectady County for a wind farm.

Now we're down to 41 counties.

Going north of Albany the Adirondack Park looms. The 9375 sq. mile park includes all or portions of several counties. Though not officially off limits to wind power development, everybody understands that it is. The Adirondacks provide the highest elevations in New York and the strongest winds in the state, according to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). Neven mind that. Not going to happen. Nor should it.

Three counties, Essex, Hamilton and Warren, are completely within the Adirondack Park. No wind power development there – ever.

Now we're down to 38 counties.

Two counties north of Albany, Saratoga County and Washington County, are not candidates for wind development. Saratoga County is doing better economically than any other upstate county. The last thing Saratoga County wants is a wind farm. Washington County, just north and east, lies on the Vermont border. In recent years Washington County has seen many of its farms purchased by down-staters and turned into weekend retreats. Lots of open farmland in Washington County, but a wind farm proposal there would go nowhere. (Also, both Saratoga County and Washington County are partly within the Adirondack Park.)

Now we're down to 36 counties.

Moving further west and north in New York we begin to get into the counties that are in the sights of wind developers. But we can immediately scratch off Onondaga Country (Syracuse and its immediate suburbs) and Monroe County (Rochester and its immediate suburbs) and Oneida County (Utica-Rome and outlying towns). Building a large scale wind farm too close to a city and its suburbs is not practical and would encounter stiff resistance for all the usual reasons. (Much of greater Buffalo fills Erie County. But the southern part of the county is sufficiently rural to have attracted wind developers, and remains a developer targeted county.)

Now we're down to 33 counties.

Let's consider the Finger Lakes Region than includes Cayuga, Cortland, Ontario, Schuyler, Seneca, Tomkins and Yates counties. The Finger Lakes and other smaller lakes figure prominently in these 7 counties. Any wind developer would quickly run into a buzzsaw of opposition from property owners and business owners who are heavily invested in preserving the natural beauty of the area. New 700 ft wind turbines would not sit well here.

Local governments in the region depend on the draw of the Finger Lakes to maintain their tax bases. There are some more rural towns in this 7 county area where a wind developer might try to squeeze in a project – but not without encountering considerable difficulty.

Now we are down to 26 counties.

Much of Fulton County lies inside the southern portion of the Adirondack Park. That's off limits. The rest of the county is in the low-lying Mohawk Valley. Neighboring Montgomery County is fully in the Mohawk Valley. Wind developers have never shown any interest in this piece of New York.

Now down to 24 Counties – just a bit more than a third of New York's counties

These are the 24 counties in New York where land based wind power has already been developed, has already been attempted and is far more likely to happen going forward than in the rest of the State.

These 24 counties, or the portions of these counties, that are most likely to be targeted by wind developers, are shown in the yellow shaded areas of the attached map:

Clinton, Franklin, St. Lawrence, Jefferson, Lewis, Oswego, Madison, Otsego, Chenango, Broome, Tioga, Chemung, Steuben, Allegheny, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Livingston, Wyoming, Erie, Genesee, Niagara, Orleans, Herkimer, and Wayne are the counties in New York where wind power developers are most likely to focus their efforts. (Herkimer County is mostly within the Adirondack Park, but is included here because the southernmost part of the county is outside the Park and has experienced limited wind development activity.)

What we can see then (if we care to look) is a kind of reverse form of the insideous practice known as redlining. Redlining is traditionally defined as a discriminatory practice by which banks, insurance companies, etc., refuse or limit loans, mortgages, insurance, etc., within specific geographic areas, especially poorer neighborhoods and communities. What we have allowed to happen in New York is the formation of invisible red lines for big scale wind power siting. These lines are not on any map, but everybody knows where they are drawn.

We allow the dumping of State subsidized huge wind power generation projects almost exclusively in the lowest income rural parts of New York. We are not denying anything to these poorer rural communities exactly – except peace and tranquility. We are imposing on them loud, visually intrusive and jarring, property value destroying infrastructure that is completely out-of-scale with any previously held conceptions of the better aspects and qualities of rural life. (Wind lobbyists shamelessly try to cover for this by saying it is for the benefit of the "poor struggling farmers" in "financially stressed communities" – as if their efforts are an act of civic virtue and generosity.)

Look at some economic data. Of the 24 counties in New York most likely to be “asked” to put up with giant, spinning, whirring, blinking wind turbines, 18 of those counties are in the bottom half of all New York counties for median household income. 15 of these 24 counties are in the bottom 20 of New York’s 62 counties for median household income, and 9 of these counties are in the bottom 10 for median household income. These numbers would be even more stark if it were not for a few small pockets of relative affluence that lift a few of these 24 counties a little bit out of the bottom half.

This is redlining. And you don’t need to get your hands on any internal confidential memo or email to know it. Elected officials, career State agency officials and wind business lobbyists are taking it as a matter of fact that there will be places where unwanted infrastructure might be tolerated and places where it certainly won’t. And they all know that there is the invisible red line. Relatively prosperous places are on one side of the line. Relatively less prosperous places are on another side of the line.

And don’t buy the argument that wind farm siting decisions are all about where the wind is. That argument went out the window with the advent of soon-to-be 700 ft wind turbines. There are plenty of places on the unshaded part of the attached map of New York where there is sufficient open space to place clusters of 600-700ft wind turbines to capture the wind quite nicely. And those places tend to be closer to existing transmission lines and to where the power is needed to boot.

But doing that that would get very nasty very quickly. Much easier to go into the poorer communities on the right side of the red lines – where resistance will be less organized and more manageable and much less well funded.

This redlining reality could be tested easily enough. Aside from the Adirondacks and the Catskills, try proposing a large-scale wind farm on the high Helderberg Plateau in western Albany County, or in the Taconic Hills of Rensselaer and Columbia Counties, or on the Hudson Highlands of Orange County or in the orchards and pastures of Greene County, or amid the horse farms of Dutchess and Putnam Counties. See how far you get with any of those proposals.

A wind developer would hit a brick wall for being on the wrong side of a red line. DOA. And that would be true no matter what state siting law was in effect – local permitting under State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR), Article 10, or the just-proposed new legislation that would create Article 23 to replace Article 10.

Much easier, no matter what siting law is in effect, for a wind developer to go after easier pickings on the other side of the red lines.

(There are some shaded areas on the map where wind power development has been attempted but not successfully due to strong and sustained local resistance – such as the Lake Ontario and St Lawrence River shore towns. Those towns remain vulnerable but because of past development failures they are now less vulnerable, by comparison to some Southern Tier towns where resistance has developed only more recently and is inconsistent county to county and from town to town.)

(Ironically, the Southern Tier that is now the most targeted by developers, was of little interest to them until just a couple of years ago. When wind turbines were generally 350ft or 380 ft tall, the prevailing wind strength in the Southern Tier was not enough to attract wind developers. As turbines crept steadily up in height recently to 600 ft and greater, the Southern Tier winds were considered to be sufficient for wind power development. The area also has the “economic challenges” that wind developers love to see and exploit. That makes their sales pitch more attractive to some.)