

Leaders Ignore Energy

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Whether it is opposition to wind farms, liquid natural gas facilities, electric transmission lines or gas pipelines, one thing is clear: Many of our political leaders are avoiding the hard decisions on energy projects vital to New England's future.

The situation is sufficiently urgent that ISO New England, which operates the regional electric transmission system, has become a leading advocate of energy efficiency. While important, this focus on energy conservation as an emergency measure stems in part from the lack of political will to advocate for new energy facilities.

Political opposition to energy projects isn't surprising. What politician wants to say "yes" to a liquefied natural gas terminal, even ones located miles offshore, as proposed near the coasts of Connecticut and Massachusetts? And why would a politician support a wind project that is being opposed by some of the most prominent citizens? But those are exactly the decisions that need to be made by political leaders.

It's much easier to complain about high costs and reliability than to advocate for solutions, especially in an election year, on a topic that can be polarizing at best and a sure loser at worst. Maybe that's why so few candidates for governor and attorney general throughout the region are talking about the need to build new energy infrastructure, including the need for new power lines, new power plants, new natural gas terminals, maybe a new nuclear or coal plant, even though consumers view energy as one of the most important issues facing the region.

The region's need for these facilities is likely to grow even more as New England commits to fighting global warming. To attain greenhouse gas reduction goals, the region's natural gas consumption will be pushed even higher, large scale wind projects will have to be built, non-emitting nuclear power and hydroelectric plants will have to keep operating and serious consideration will have to be given to new technologies including advanced nuclear plants, clean coal technologies and all types of renewable energy projects. Yet, there is no apparent leadership to address the problem of how best the region collectively can meet environmental goals while ensuring reliable and affordable natural gas and electricity supplies.

A few months ago, five prominent experts convened at the request of the New England Energy Alliance to discuss New England's energy challenges. The two overarching challenges were lack of leadership and complex siting processes, both of which are impeding regional energy development. Unfortunately, there was little optimism that the logjam blocking projects can be broken.

The common refrain is to argue for more energy efficiency and hope that we won't need the rest. But that's a false choice. New England already leads the nation in energy efficiency programs. Cost-effective investments in these programs are vitally important to the region and should be

encouraged. But they alone will not obviate the need for new energy facilities if the region is to maintain a reliable system with a strong economic foundation to meet the needs of business, industry and residential consumers. In a region without indigenous fuel resources New England must consider every option available.

Unless and until the region's political leaders start working together on broad energy policies and actions to overcome the region's opposition toward energy development, New England is likely to find itself in a deepening energy crisis.

In the upcoming elections, each candidate should be asked about positions on energy issues. In addition to support for programs to use energy more efficiently, candidates should not ignore the need to support new facilities to meet new demand and replace aging infrastructure. Voters should demand, and certainly deserve, no less.

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