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Let the energy siting process work

Boston Business Journal - by [Carl Gustin](#)

The Boston Business Journal's Jackie Noblett earlier this month did an excellent job describing the dilemma the state faces as it struggles with high energy costs and increasingly stringent environmental regulations. She rightly noted the tension between those who believe more efficient use of energy will eliminate the need for new power plants and those who believe that new plants are a must.

It's a debate with real consequences. Many major power plants in the region are getting old. New plants are being added but many are designed only to meet peak demand, not the round-the-clock load that drives the economy. Renewable energy is needed to meet environmental goals, but projects are likely to be located in remote areas requiring construction of new transmission lines.

Siting energy projects isn't easy. Gaining approval is a balancing act between local interests and the public good. So when elected officials demonstrate a willingness to end-run established regulatory processes they may be telling developers, "Don't invest here." Such action is bad public policy.

There are three examples of legislative interference in Massachusetts. First, a provision in Congress in 2006 would have given the Massachusetts governor veto power over Cape Wind, a wind-powered plant to be located in federal waters, even if the project satisfied all other regulatory requirements.

Then, Weaver's Cove, the proposed liquefied natural gas plant in Fall River, witnessed successful congressional action to save an unused bridge for the sole purpose of derailing the project.

Most recently, the state Legislature has been considering a misguided provision in a bill that would impose local zoning requirements on two power plants moving through a well-established licensing process.

While the New England Energy Alliance does not take positions on specific projects -- and none of the developers of projects discussed here are NEEA members -- the policy implications of the actions taken by elected officials are of great concern to us.

New England needs about one new renewable project the size of Cape Wind every year for the next decade to meet climate change goals. Weaver's Cove would provide greater supply diversity, reliability and cost competitiveness for consumers. The two power plant projects targeted by the state Senate provision would be highly efficient plants that use natural gas, a relatively clean burning fuel.

The state and federal government have rigorous and thorough processes for permitting energy projects designed to balance local concern with public interests. When elected officials act to circumvent those processes, it is a risky path that could lead to energy supply instability.

Carl Gustin is president of the New England Energy Alliance, a coalition of energy providers and business and trade organizations concerned about future energy supplies.