



Carl Gustin: Candidates must address energy needs

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WHETHER it is opposition to wind farms, liquefied-natural-gas facilities, electric-transmission lines, or natural-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. But though important, this focus on energy conservation as an emergency measure stems in part from the lack of political will to push 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 miles offshore, as proposed near the coasts of Massachusetts and Connecticut? And why would a politician support a wind project opposed by 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 push for solutions -- especially in an election year -- on a topic 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 new power lines, power plants, natural-gas terminals and 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 itself 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 the region can best collectively meet environmental goals while ensuring reliable and affordable natural-gas and electricity supplies.

Prominent experts convened this year -- at the request of the New England Energy Alliance, a coalition of energy providers, business and trade organizations and others concerned about future energy supplies -- 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 could be broken.

The 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 vital, but they alone won't 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. With no indigenous fossil-fuel resources, New England must consider every option available.

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

In the coming elections, each candidate should be asked about positions on energy issues. In addition to supporting programs to use energy more efficiently, the candidates should support new facilities, to meet new demand and replace aging infrastructure. The voters should demand - and certainly they deserve -- no less.

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