

Will project find a zephyr or turbulence?

If all goes according to schedule, the fate of the Nantucket Sound wind farm project may be much clearer by the end of 2006.

After all, the federal Department of Interior recently outlined a tentative timeline under which the project will be reviewed - including the near

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completion of an environmental report by early 2007.

But of course, if history is any indicator, the biggest developments in the ongoing saga of Cape Wind are likely to be those least expected.

Last year, for instance, there were quiet attempts to undermine the project on Capitol Hill, lawsuits filed, even a massive shift in which a government agency will have final say on the offshore development that is now approaching \$1 billion.

And there remains the matter of the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, a well-financed coalition that wants to stop the project.

If approved, the Cape Wind Associates plan to build 130 turbines in the shallow waters of Nantucket Sound would be the nation's first offshore wind farm.

As the new year begins, the Interior Department's Minerals Management Service continues to review the proposal.

By the spring, the agency may release a new draft environmental impact statement on the project. A series of public hearings are tentatively scheduled for the summer, with a final report due in early 2007.

In the meantime, skyrocketing electricity costs will make more and more residents support the renewable offshore project, said Mark Rodgers, a Cape Wind spokesman.

Later in the year, the company will likely announce major contractors for the project and unveil details on a power-purchase agreement.

That may be so, said Charles Vinick, CEO of the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound. But more critical, he said, is the fact that the Department of Interior is not just reviewing the Cape Wind project, but is still crafting its own policy on offshore development of renewable projects.

"They may well have contractors," Vinick said. "But the real issue is whether Cape Wind will ever receive a permit to proceed with this project.

"And that's a story for the future."