

Wind battle: It's more than aesthetics

For a few weeks it has appeared that the battle for Nantucket Sound will end anti-climactically as a footnote to a big national law proposed by a senator from Alaska. A Republican senator, no less.

I would much have preferred the drama of a Capewide plebiscite. No one knows how such a vote would go, but the idea that only a handful of those wealthy enough to afford a view of Nantucket Sound are opposed to the offshore turbines has always been nonsense. (Nantucket voters recently opposed the wind farm in a nonbinding referendum.) In any case, that's how it should have been settled here on the Cape. Lobbying and back-room maneuvering all strike this naive columnist as spoiling the natural drama of democracy.

But it was never going to come down to local determination anyway. Both sides had money and lobbyists, and it was going to be settled behind the scenes - however it was settled. So we'll take what we can get.

On the other hand, lest we opponents start feeling guilty at having gotten what we wanted the wrong way, this seems a good moment to remind ourselves of the solid arguments against this ill-advised proposal.

First, forget the argument that wind power is a good idea but that Nantucket Sound is too special a place to build a wind farm. Most places think of themselves as special.

Also, forget the arguments about birds and aesthetics.

The evidence is not strong that the turbines will kill significant numbers of birds.

And there are always going to be people who argue, plausibly, that a 450-foot high whirligig is as beautiful a sight as a suspension bridge or the Eiffel tower. There's no accounting for taste.

It's not the inherent aesthetic, it's the meaning of the installation. The towers may look small from the shore (say the supporters) but even if you are never going to see those 130 Statue of Liberty-high turbines because those aren't the beaches you go to, you would know formerly open water has been industrialized big-time in a place where meaning is so much about being surrounded by water.

That's huge. It's how the offshore installation looms in the mind's eye



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that's the price we pay. Not to mention the incalculable change in our image to potential paying summer customers.

No, contrary to proponents who belittle the sacrifice (only the view of a few rich people), there would be a price all right, and a big one. But if we were to get, say, a substantial reduction in our electric bill, say \$1000 per year per household, it might well feel like a price worth paying.

Everything has a price, right? But early on, it became clear that the average savings per Cape Cod household was 30 cents a month.

As was made clear in a recent New York Times piece on the controversy about turbines in upstate New York, the people happiest with turbines are those getting a substantial royalty for hosting one or more on their land.

But money isn't everything. What other compensation are we being offered for our sacrifice? Are we talking about the dismantling or even significant cutting back of Mirant and Pilgrim and the considerable peace of mind that would bring? Sorry. In both cases, no.

But all this sounds so selfish. Surely personal gain isn't the only consideration.

No, it isn't. If a Nantucket Sound industrial park were part of a democratically arrived nationwide program to radically alter our energy situation, to put turbines everywhere, in every back yard, it would feel like a completely different situation. If the sacrifice were general, and involved the immediate elimination of the SUV option, requiring all new houses to incorporate passive solar principles, and joining worldwide anti-global warming efforts, we would no doubt feel duty-bound to do our part.

But of course there is no such program. There is every chance the sacrifice of Nantucket Sound would end up a token martyrdom.

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