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NEWS ANALYSIS

Friends of Teddy Kennedy Try to Kill Offshore Wind Farm

By Robert Novak
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WASHINGTON -- Rich, oceanfront residents of Cape Cod do not want their view of Nantucket Sound faintly obstructed by offshore protrusions of a proposed wind farm. So, they have hired high-priced lobbyists to kill Cape Wind, a project providing an environmentally sound source of energy. Their most important ally in this venture is a fellow wealthy Cape Cod landowner, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.



Friends of Teddy Kennedy

Opposition to America's first offshore wind farm seems a peculiar posture for the liberal lion of the Senate. The self-indulgent squires of Cape Cod likewise seem a strange set of friends for Teddy Kennedy. He is also joined in opposition by Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, a Republican presidential prospect. Furthermore, Kennedy's key congressional allies against the wind farm are two senior Alaska Republicans who are reigning princes of pork on Capitol Hill, Sen. Ted Stevens and Rep. Don Young.

The Alaskans planned to dispose of the wind farm by embedding a provision in obscure legislation to be passed in the dead of night, a procedure usually abhorred by Kennedy. Not even the senator's most severe critics would accuse him of using his influence for personal gain. That only deepens the mystery of why Kennedy would align himself against environmental groups (including the radical Greenpeace) and the Republican chairman and ranking Democrat on the Senate Energy Committee.

Supporters of the offshore grid of 130 wind turbines, standing 400 feet above the water, say it would supply three-quarters of the energy needs of Cape Cod, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. By replacing use of oil, they say, it would sharply reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Kennedy opposes this, explains the buzz on Capitol Hill, because he does not want to despoil the pristine appearance of a natural resource dear to his family and the memory of John F. Kennedy.

The explanation has been spread by an aide to Sen. Jeff Bingaman, the Energy Committee's ranking Democrat. He says Bingaman asked Kennedy why he opposes Cape Wind and received this answer: "This is Jack's sacred sailing ground." Both Bingaman and Kennedy denied the story to me.

The Kennedy family compound at Hyannisport overlooks Nantucket Sound, about eight miles from the proposed wind farm. But the senator cited to me his vote against repeal of the estate tax, about to come up in the Senate again shortly, as proof he never hesitates to oppose his economic self-interest. "This is the first for this country, and we need to get it right," Kennedy said. "We don't get it right when we give it to special interests without competitive bidding."

Cape Cod landowners are not interested in Jack Kennedy's legacy or special privileges for Cape Wind. Horrified by an obstructed seaview and interference with their yachting, they retained top lobbyists. Guy R. Martin of the Perkins Coie law firm in Washington is registered as representing the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound. Two former congressmen -- Republican Tom Loeffler of Texas and Democrat Billy Lee Evans of Georgia -- have lobbied against the wind farm.

The Kennedy neighbors on Cape Cod have traditionally opposed the Kennedys politically, but they are all in bed together in opposing Cape Wind. That includes the Egan family, owners of EMC Corp. who have been generous in political contributions to Republicans, notably Romney. Industrialist William I. Koch, another Republican benefactor, joins Kennedy in the battle.

Kennedy may be evil incarnate for right-wing ideologues, but the wind farm fight shows how well he gets along with Republican politicians, such as Romney. On NBC's "Meet the Press" recently, Kennedy overflowed with compliments for the Republican governor. When I pointed this out to Romney, he responded by praising the Democratic senator's cooperation on Massachusetts issues -- such as the wind farm.

If Massachusetts politicians of both parties are against something, that's enough for the powerful Alaskan legislators. They may take issue with Kennedy ideologically, but he never has interfered with Alaskan pork. Accordingly, Stevens inserted in the Coast Guard money bill a provision enabling the governor of Massachusetts to veto the project. Ideally, that procedure is supposed to result in undiscovered passage. It did not this time, to the dismay of Teddy Kennedy and his friends, who now face a floor fight in Congress.

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