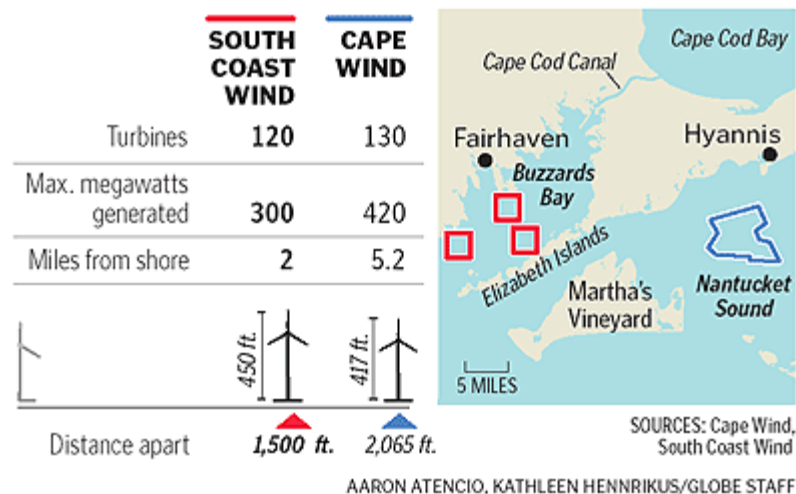




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Buzzards Bay wind farm proposed Foes of Cape plan signal support

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By Michael Levenson, Globe Staff | May 24, 2006

After years of contentious battles over a wind farm off Nantucket, a new proposal to build wind turbines in Buzzards Bay has pushed the debate in new directions, drawing interest from some foes of the Nantucket plan and dragging a new set of concerns into the fray.

Prominent Boston construction contractor Jay M. Cashman wants to build up to 120 wind turbines off Fairhaven and Dartmouth, in one of the Northeast's busiest shipping channels and a popular recreation area. The turbines would reach heights of 450 feet, and be located as close as 2 miles off shore.

Cashman plans to formally submit the proposal, which he said could generate half of Cape Cod's electricity, to the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs Friday. He has been sharing the outline of the \$750 million project with local officials and members of Congress.

While local officials were wary yesterday, there were signals that some of the powerful state and federal officials who have helped stall the Cape Wind project in Nantucket Sound could support the Cashman plan. The officials, especially Governor Mitt Romney, have expressed reluctance to allow development in Nantucket Sound, which the governor called a national treasure. The area being eyed by Cashman is a well-traveled shipping channel used by more than 8,000 commercial vessels last year, including giant oil tankers.

"Wind is an important alternative source of energy, which Governor Romney supports," said Eric Fehrstrom, spokesman for Romney. "We think the proposed Buzzards Bay wind farm is an intriguing idea and we're anxious to learn more about it."

Said US Representative Barney Frank, who represents New Bedford and has supported congressional efforts to kill the Nantucket Sound proposal: "I'm in favor if it in principle and hopeful that it can be worked out. . . . We need energy that is renewable and nonpolluting, particularly in Southeastern Mass."

Cashman stressed that the proposal is in preliminary stages and said he is eager to work with residents and officials. Numerous agencies must approve such a plan, the including the state EOEa and the US Army Corps of Engineers. Local officials say they will also insist the proposal undergo review by conservation commissions for communities along the shore. In addition, Congress is debating a measure pushed by Senator Edward M. Kennedy that would allow the governor to veto such offshore developments.

Mark Rodgers, a spokesman for Cape Wind, said Cashman's plans would not affect efforts in Nantucket Sound, and said Cape Wind would not take a position on the Buzzards Bay idea.

``We wish him well," Rodgers said of Cashman.

Cashman, whose company has built part of the Big Dig and is now constructing the Greenbush commuter rail line, said he got the idea to build a wind farm two years ago, when he was considering building turbines for the Cape Wind project. Cashman said his wind farm could generate 200 to 300 badly needed construction jobs and 20 to 30 maintenance jobs for the New Bedford area, and at the same time, help alleviate US dependence on foreign oil.

``This wind is a great thing," he said yesterday. ``It's about clean air, clean water."

After considering several sites along the East Coast, Cashman said he settled on three areas in Buzzards Bay -- off Fairhaven, Dartmouth, and Naushon Island -- because they have average annual wind speeds of 20 miles per hour, ocean depths of 50 to 60 feet to hold the turbines, and are close to existing transmission lines. By 2011, he hopes to build 30 to 40 turbines in each of the three areas.

``It wasn't a big jump for us to develop this," Cashman said. He noted his firm, Jay Cashman Inc., has experience with ocean construction, having helped deepen New York Harbor and build the Deer Island Sewage Treatment Plant in Boston Harbor.

But several local officials expressed concerns that Cashman's project could pose safety and environmental hazards. Buzzards Bay is 28 miles long and 8 miles wide on average and attracted 14,000 recreational boats last year, according to the Army Corps of Engineers. Those pleasure boaters were joined by barges hauling jet fuel to Logan International Airport and tankers carrying oil through the Cape Cod Canal to Boston.

``There's a lot that we still need to hear on this proposal -- from the fishing industry, the recreational users and some of the environmental analysts," said state Representative William M. Straus, a Democrat from Mattapoisett. ``Buzzards Bay, even though it may not look it on a map is a fairly narrow, congested waterway, and when things go wrong, navigationally or environmentally, there are big impacts very quickly. So they have a hill to climb here."

In April 2003, a tanker accident dumped about 98,000 gallons of oil into Buzzards Bay, polluting miles of coastline, temporarily shutting shellfish beds, and killing hundreds of birds. Investigators believe the tanker struck a ledge near the bay's entrance, gashing its hull.

Senator Mark C. Montigny, a Democrat who represents New Bedford, Dartmouth, and Fairhaven, recalled the accident, saying he was concerned that 120 turbines would not fit safely in the bay, which is smaller than the area Cape Wind is considering off Nantucket Sound.

``I want to give them the benefit of the doubt," Montigny said. ``But it seems way out of scope and scale for a much smaller bay in this case."

Buzzards Bay is also home to 2,400 roseate terns, roughly half the Northeast population of the bird, which is on the national endangered species list, said Jack Clarke, director of public policy and government relations for the Massachusetts Audubon Society. He said the project would need to safeguard that population.

``I understand why everyone is clamoring for this, I just don't think this type of a project makes sense for Southeastern Massachusetts," said New Bedford Mayor Scott W. Lang. ``I certainly don't favor wind farms out in the most beautiful protected water maybe in the United States . . . These industrial generators are bigger than any building or any tower that we have in Southeastern Massachusetts, from here to Providence, I'm sure, and from Providence all through the Cape. These dwarf what we normally consider to be tall structures."

Yesterday, Cashman said he had talked about his proposal with Senators Kennedy and John F. Kerry, and described them as willing to consider the proposal on its merits.

Kerry, whose family has used exclusive Naushon Island as a summer retreat for generations, declined to be interviewed. An aide released a statement saying: ``It's clear America needs to find renewable energy sources, and Senator Kerry would love to see wind energy powering homes in Massachusetts and throughout the United States. He thinks any proposal should go through a rigorous process to determine its impact on the environment and affected communities.``

Kennedy, whose opposition to the Nantucket Sound project has drawn criticism from environmentalists, echoed those remarks in a statement released by his office.

``I hope this proposal will start a thoughtful discussion in Massachusetts about which state waters are appropriate for alternative energy development," the statement said. ``I strongly support the development of alternative energy sources, but we need to accomplish that goal through a careful process that examines the effect of each proposed development on the environment and navigation, and that pays close attention to the economy and interests of the communities most directly affected by the project."

US Representative William D. Delahunt, Democrat of Quincy, who represents Cape Cod and has opposed the Nantucket Sound wind farm, said of Cashman, ``He's talking about involving the community, and I applaud that."

Michael Levenson can be reached at mlevenson@globe.com. Material from Associated Press was used in this report. ■

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