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Praises fly as project for wind farm begins

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Dennis C. Enser/Buffalo News
Breaking ground for Steel Winds, from left, are Jaime Steve of American Wind Energy Association, Paul Curran and his son, Reilly, 10, County Executive Joel A. Giambra and Lackawanna Mayor Norman Polanski Jr.

The developers of a wind turbine farm on the old Bethlehem Steel plant property celebrated its groundbreaking Friday, hailing the project, dubbed "Steel Winds," as a bold and progressive step for the region and the environment.

"As of today, we're not at an old steel mill," said Paul Curran, the managing director of BQ Energy, the Pawling, N.Y.-based company spearheading the project, as he addressed politicians and local business officials who gathered at the site.

"We're at a new wind farm," Curran said.

Eight giant windmills, each taller than Buffalo City Hall, will be erected along a bluff on the western edge of the sprawling industrial site by around Thanksgiving, according to Curran's plan.

The windmills will be operating by late December or early January and will feed enough electricity to power about 6,000 households into the National Grid power grid - 20 megawatts.

Several Western New York communities have opposed other wind farms, but in all of those cases the turbines were in rural areas.

Both developers and politicians praised Lackawanna residents for welcoming the Steel Winds project, noting that the massive wind turbines will be located in the polluted, nearly abandoned steel plant site.

"This is a classic example of taking a lemon and making lemonade," said County Executive Joel A. Giambra.

Officials also said the project can use the infrastructure at the steel plant, including the power substation, power lines and even the harbor channel to ship in the 300-foot blades from Brazil.

The project is set to receive millions in tax breaks from the state and federal government, including about \$5 million in state tax credits for developing on a brownfields site.

Although Steel Winds won't have to pay property taxes, BQ Energy will pay the City of Lackawanna \$100,000 every year for the next 15 years.

Two local construction crews - Hohl Industrial and Pinto Construction - began work on the site earlier this week. They have dug two holes, about 60 feet wide and roughly 10 feet deep, into the steel slag of the bluff.

The construction phase will employ about 40 workers at its peak, but once complete, the windmills will require a staff of no more than five people, Mitzkovski said.

Steel Winds will mark several firsts for the region and for the wind power industry. It's the first wind farm to be built on the U.S. shore of Lake Erie. It's also the first project BQ Energy will be getting off the ground. The firm also hopes to put a wind farm on the now-closed Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island in New York City.

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