



THE BUFFALO NEWS

 PRINT THIS

FOCUS: WIND ENERGY

Windmill power spins into reality

Where steel smokestacks once billowed, giant blades harness electricity, signaling a future full of potential

By Maki Becker NEWS STAFF REPORTER
Updated: 06/07/07 7:23 AM

The eight towering windmills that make up the Steel Winds wind farm at the old Bethlehem Steel plant site in Lackawanna are up and running.

Nine months after developers broke ground on the unprecedented wind energy project, the giant blades can now be seen spinning in the strong, steady gusts off Lake Erie — and they are not only generating electricity. They're creating a buzz.

At a wind energy conference in Los Angeles this month that has drawn about 7,000 participants, the windmill manufacturer — Clipper Windpower — fielded questions about the progress of the Lackawanna project.

A delegation of officials from Cleveland came here to tour the wind farm as the fellow Rust Belt city mulls a similar project on former industrial land there.

Lackawanna Mayor Norman L. Polanski Jr. has been deluged with calls about the 20-megawatt wind farm that has become a symbol of both the future of renewable energy and the possibilities of urban renewal in the national — and even international — media.

“Al-Jazeera called, and I thought, Oh, my God,” Polanski said.

A producer from the Arab news network who had grown up in Rochester was interested in coming to Lackawanna to do a feature on the windmills. Polanski also has taken calls from NBC News and Fox News.

“Something interesting is going on here,” Polanski said. “And it’s all good. Finally, Western New York has got the limelight.”

The \$40 million wind project marks several firsts in the burgeoning wind industry in the United States, helping to bring attention to the region as well as the wind power business.

- It is the first “urban” wind farm in the country.

- It's the world's first commercial project to use Clipper Windpower's massive Liberty series turbines.

The wind farm is the first of its kind in the United States to be built on a former industrial site and the first to go up along the shores of the American side of the Great Lakes.

The developers of Steel Winds are apparently so happy with the way the project has gone that "we are looking at the idea of expanding the project," said Mark B. Mitskovski, project manager of Steel Winds.

They are considering building as many as 19 additional windmills on the old Bethlehem Steel property, Mitskovski said.

So far, just two have been permitted for the Lackawanna side of the property. Eleven more are being proposed for the Lackawanna side and an additional six on the Hamburg side.

Hamburg officials have raised some concerns about the turbines and initially even considered a moratorium on wind energy projects.

Instead, the town is working on a comprehensive wind ordinance that would set rules for any future development. A public hearing on the ordinance is scheduled Monday.

Steel Winds is hardly the only wind power project in the area.

Later this month, Noble Environmental Power is breaking ground on a \$210 million, 67-turbine farm, dubbed the Noble Bliss Wind Park, in the Town of Eagle in Wyoming County.

It is a different, much larger-scale wind power project than Steel Winds — one that is far more typical of those found on rural areas nationwide.

Noble Bliss is being built on private farms, with farmers receiving monetary compensation. The town also was able to forgo levying any taxes on its residents this year because of payments from Noble.

Many wind farms in rural areas of Western New York — including another Noble project in Allegany County — have met with some opposition from the community over concerns regarding aesthetics, impact on birds and other wildlife, sound pollution and property values.

Sherry Grugel, who handles community outreach in Western New York for Noble, said she believes that Steel Winds is starting to make people less wary of wind farms.

"I have talked to more people who have gone out to go see them," she said. ". . . Everybody looks at them, and they look good."

Steel Winds also is standing as an example of the potential for economic development of the region's industrial land along Lake Erie.

The windmills that now spin atop a mountain of steel byproduct on the long-shuttered Bethlehem Steel plant site are suddenly piquing the interest of all kinds of developers.

"People are talking about the site," said Christopher S. Pawenski, coordinator of Erie County's industrial-assistance program. Steel Winds "grabs someone's interest who would never think of looking at Lackawanna or Buffalo," Pawenski said. "They think, 'Wow! Look at that!'"

Developers are realizing that "the soil can't be that bad if they're willing to invest \$40 million," he added.

To make the land even more attractive, the county is getting ready to move the rail lines on the property to make it more accessible for trucks from Route 5, he said.

Also, Tecumseh, the current owner of the land, is working on investigating and cleaning up 400 acres of its property to meet state requirements that would designate the land as a brownfield, with special tax incentives.

The Wind Action Group, a local organization that has been a strong proponent of Steel Winds, is hoping to host a conference soon that would explore the potential for spinoff projects, including the creation of technical jobs related to wind energy production. Pawenski is quick to point out that while millions of private dollars are being poured into the Steel Winds project, very little tax revenue and just a handful of jobs are being generated.

“By state law, [renewable energy projects] are tax-exempt,” he explained. The federal government also offers numerous tax incentives for such projects.

Steel Winds developers worked out an agreement with the City of Lackawanna, agreeing to pay \$100,000 a year for the next 15 years for the eight turbines that are in place.

Pawenski said the lack of revenue is made up for by all the interest the project is creating.

“To me,” he said, “it is free PR every time the windmills are talked about.”

mbecker@buffnews.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.buffalonews.com/home/story/93055.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2007 The Buffalo News.