

Wait for NCCI-Gardner turbines to go online drags on

With the growing popularity of green energy in recent years, it's pretty typical to be overwhelmed by advocates espousing a litany of benefits associated with renewable sources, whether it be wind, solar, hydro, or a geothermal.

Across the Greater Gardner area recently, the green energy of choice has clearly been wind, from the lone turbine behind the Narragansett Regional Middle-High School complex in Baldwinville to a pair of turbines at both Mount Wachusett Community College and the North Central Correctional Institution in Gardner.

Recalling a short window of time when the pair of MWCC turbines sat idle, having been erected by the end of December 2010 — before going online the following April — the situation at NCCI-Gardner, by comparison, has dragged on in a much more disconcerting fashion.

Critics of wind power often point to hordes of rusting turbine skeletons lingering well past their lifespan — such as the many sitting idle in California no longer creating electricity — as proof that wind as a form of green energy isn't worth the major investment.

Making matters worse, the NCCI-Gardner project represents at a minimum poor planning, and

at worst failed execution of that plan. But its many delays also fuel the fire for those who see troubled projects organized and funded by a government entity as proof that such efforts can only succeed when orchestrated in the private sector.

ON FURTHER REVIEW



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Even if the pair of turbines at NCCI-Gardner might not be rusting just yet, the fact that the installation of the prison turbines came only shortly after those at MWCC should be rather telling.

While the MWCC turbines are about to celebrate their second anniversary of generating electricity, the NCCI-Gardner pair are still waiting to flip the switch, suffering from enough delays to concern even the strongest advocates of green energy.

Making it tougher to swallow the many delays associated with the NCCI-Gardner turbine project — which as already run up a cost of \$10.7 million — is that

one would think the paying of that bill would only kick in once those turbines began to spin. But with so many delays, the Massachusetts taxpayer has already taken a hit in the wallet, as the bond funding the project started with payments in fiscal 2012.

That running meter, picking up speed with a 3.5 percent interest rate, has run up payments totaling more than \$425,000, without a single kilowatt of generated power to show for it. The purported annual savings of \$500,000 only should frustrate taxpayers, for whom the motionless blades serve as a daily reminder how poor planning can quickly mushroom into an ugly mess.

While representatives of National Grid seek to soften the blow by claiming such projects should be viewed as requiring 18 to 24 months to go online, the fact that there are issues dating back more than two years that have yet to be checked off cannot be justified.

Department of Correction officials also have tried to offer up their own share of excuses, arguing that the project was “complicated.”

If erecting two turbines is seen as such, God help us when it comes time to actually begin work on the 130-turbine Cape Wind project that has already

been delayed 11 years. Using the same logic, any turbines erected as part of that project probably will sit idle for its full 20-year lifespan without a single spin.

Even as President Barack Obama touted green energy during his State of the Union address on Feb. 12 — largely thanks to the benefit of jobs created in the construction or installation of wind projects — the NCCI-Gardner example does little to give a needed boost to a fledgling form of energy creation.

Considering the extensive delays that NCCI-Gardner has encountered on such a small-scale project — which is slated to generate 3.3 megawatts of electricity once online, enough to serve the local prison and partially accommodate the needs at Massachusetts Correctional Institution-Shirley and the Souza-Baranowski Maximum Security facility in Shirley — any question concerning the relative scope of the work can be answered by the fact that Cape Wind projects to generate 468 megawatts.

Unfortunately, even those two widely different projects aren't rare exceptions to wind projects mired in delays. Simply typing in the phrase “wind turbine” and the words “delayed” and “project” pulls up an eye-popping 772,000 results.

In describing the rather tenuous market for wind turbine construction for 2013, a Bloomberg piece noted how “Grid-connection problems from Germany to China have also stalled projects,” showing NCCI-Gardner's ongoing problems are hardly unique, largely tied to a long-awaited installation of a third data line.

Considering the numerous delays at NCCI-Gardner, it would be easy to classify them as resulting from unexpected curveballs. But Charlotte McCormack, spokesperson for National Grid, said there were “always three communication lines required.”

As McCormack explained, the need for the communication lines have been outlined numerous times to the Department of Correction and J.K. Scanlon Co., the project contractor tasked with erecting the turbines — most notably with an impact study completed on Jan. 24, 2011, and also in the interconnection service agreement dated Feb. 3, 2012.

Based on the third data line having yet to be installed, one has to wonder if the study and the agreement were to the DOC and Scanlon akin to that set of assembly instructions that ends up in the trash when buying that new kid's bike, preferring to build it solely on guesswork, versus actually reading the instructions.

From the perspective of

National Grid, as McCormack noted, “It was the (Department of Correction's) responsibility to install (the data lines),” with the utility learning the lines were not installed during a witness test on Dec. 21.

So exactly why this data line issue continues practically two months later is hard to answer, as all parties now are well aware of the situation.

Could NCCI-Gardner, though, have reached a point where the light will be finally switched on?

A deadline was offered last week by Greg Inman, a project manager with J.K. Scanlon Co., stating that the third data line was set to be installed Feb. 27, with a one to two-week period of testing to follow.

From there, I can begin to envision spinning turbine blades ... but one only need to look back on the project's recent history to take a wait-and-see attitude with such supposed deadlines.

Back in December, National Grid talked of having the turbines operational by January. More importantly, back in January 2011, during the construction of the NCCI-Gardner turbines, talk of generating electricity was slated for the summer of 2011.

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