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Pair suggests community buy into Enfield wind farm

Investments would create economy of scale, Council of Governments told

By Stacey Shackford
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Residents in Caroline have been itching to own their own community renewable energy source for years -- especially after learning that the revenue from a few big wind turbines could eliminate taxes in the town -- but the capital outlay has proven too daunting.

Now they are looking west, to Enfield, where developer John Rancich is attempting to build a 20-turbine wind farm along Black Oak Road that could provide 50 megawatts a year, enough to power nearly 56,000 homes in Tompkins County.

Not only do they want to benefit as customers, but they are also considering buying in as investors, and they have teamed up with like-minded individuals in Danby and Ithaca to encourage others to do the same.

Caroline's deputy town supervisor Dominic Frongillo and Danby environmentalist Eric Banford made a presentation to local government leaders at the Tompkins County Council of Governments meeting last week, advocating for a community-owned power project.

They argued that such a move would help the county meet its greenhouse gas emission reduction target, become energy independent and stabilize prices for local residential and business customers. Profits also would stay in the community, leading to more job creation, business income and tax revenue, they said, estimating an annual economic impact from $4million to $6 million.

The main cost comes upfront: the equipment. Once in place, the fuel is free, and payback is expected within 10 years, Frongillo said.

He asked that local municipalities and businesses sign non-binding letters indicating their intent to become customers, so the project might better attract potential investors. Ithaca College has already done so, he added.

Then they should consider becoming investors themselves, or help devise a program in which individuals could become shareholders, Banford said.

"If the wind farm costs $100 million to build, and you divide that between 50,000 households, that's only $2,000 per household," Banford said. "You cannot put a 2.2 kWh PV (photovoltaic) system on a house for $2,000, so the economy of scale works for us here. We have to think big if we are to meet our 2020 energy strategy."