

## VISUAL IMPACT - Leslie Kaduck

Over the years the wind energy industry has learned how to design projects in such a way that the negative visual impact of industrial turbines is somewhat reduced. Developers and industry analysts have well-established methodologies for identifying areas of high scenic value and evaluating aesthetic impacts on sensitive areas. There are industry protocols in place in many jurisdictions to optimize energy production and mitigate the negative impact of wind industry on landscape coherence. There is little evidence, however, that the firm behind the Wolfe Island wind factory proposal has paid any attention to these developments. And there is no evidence whatsoever that local and provincial governments are even dimly aware of how badly they have shirked their responsibility to preserve the scenic heritage of Kingston and the islands.

It may be true that some people find wind turbines attractive. But even industry insiders acknowledge that the most beautiful human-made objects can be inappropriate in certain settings. When a project, taken as a whole, offends the sensibilities of the average person, because it is out of character with its surroundings and significantly diminishes the scenic qualities of the area, then industry ought to take reasonable steps to mitigate the adverse impact of the project

The Wolfe Island proposal could result in a random array of 86 massive turbines, 400ft in height, in Phase I of the project with the possibility of 50 more towers to follow in Phase II. In March of this year local media reported “audible gasps” as members of the public viewed the artists’ renditions of the proposal by Canadian Hydro Developers Inc. The severity of the response of viewers was related directly to the placement and prominence of the turbines.

Industry research has shown that visual clutter is one of the chief reasons that some wind projects are considered eyesores. Projects receiving the greatest public acceptance have been those with uniform turbines in small groupings as opposed to randomly placed clusters in large arrays. Studies have shown that in order to reduce potential impact, ‘free zones’ separating clusters should be established.

Smaller turbines have been shown to have less negative impact on the landscape than larger turbines; but the influence of size has been found to be relatively small compared with the influence of the number of units. Planners now favour the installation of fewer larger turbines. The Nova Scotia government, for example, acknowledges that the spatial extent of a wind farm should be in context with the existing landscape and should not overly dominate a landscape. The predominantly rural state of Vermont requires among other things that projects must not have an unduly adverse effect on the natural beauty of a given area, aesthetics, sites of historical interest or rare and irreplaceable natural areas. One of the reasons wind energy projects have been so successful in Denmark and Germany is that most projects consist of single turbines or small clusters, rather than large arrays.

In other words, jurisdictions *can expect companies to adopt reasonable alternatives* that would mitigate the adverse impact of the project, including but not limited to *reduction of the mass or density of the project*.

The council representing Wolfe Island has established no such requirements. The City of Kingston has turned a “blind eye” to the project, despite the permanent, degrading effect the current turbine height, placement and density will have on the historic Kingston waterfront.

Residents and valued visitors to the area have a high expectation of experiencing a historically intact landscape. View duration – the length of time a viewer spends looking at the turbines and other site features – is a relevant factor. In general, if turbines are seen as a quick glimpse while driving along, the impact is less. Prominence increases when an object is seen in the center of a view. This is especially problematic if turbines are seen in the context of an important visual focal point, where it will compete for our attention.

Residents and tourists to the Kingston area will watch these turbines from their homes, offices, boats, hotel and restaurant patios. The project will strongly impact the views of Confederation Basin, Olympic Harbour, Fort Henry, Queen's University and other culturally significant sites. Massive arrays of turbines will soon dominate the waterfront landscape. The artists' renditions demonstrated the current proposal is completely incongruent with one of the most aesthetically and historically sensitive sites in Canada – Kingston's waterfront and the Thousand Islands corridor to Lake Ontario and the St Lawrence Seaway.

The company in question has convinced some that only the current intensification is feasible. The evolution of industry practice in other jurisdictions belies this threat.

The wind industry is an economic sector like any other. Investors put money into companies, and expect to maximize their return. They assume that management will use every tool at its disposal to contribute to profitability, including government subsidies. Smart management will seek out jurisdictions that ask the least of the company, while contributing to the bottom line.

The Township of Frontenac Islands and the City of Kingston offer fertile ground for the wind industry because elected officials demand almost nothing from the developers other than cash. Some citizens are agitating for reasonable adjustments to the site plan. Governments entrusted with the preservation of our national and local heritage ought to secure reasonable visual landscape standards for this and future projects. People need a coherent environment in tandem with sustainable economic development.

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