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Officials urged to cast their towns' energy fate to wind

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Nearly 50 officials from towns across Ocean County came to the borough's first Ocean County Wind Summit on Tuesday to learn about harnessing wind to supply energy to municipal buildings and other facilities.

Arranged by Mayor Paul J. Kennedy and resident James H. Fry, a retired Navy engineer and wind-power advocate, the summit was open to all elected officials and presented speakers from across the country discussing the positive aspects of using wind power and dispelling common myths about wind turbines.

"We are a tiny little town," Kennedy said. "The impact we have with these municipalities is so important. We are the pioneers, and it hasn't been easy."

Ocean Gate has taken several steps toward relying on wind power for municipal energy, and the Borough Council will be considering a resolution at 7 tonight to begin selecting a location for a municipal wind turbine.

The borough held the summit to encourage other towns with appropriate locations and consistent wind to consider wind power as an energy source beneficial both environmentally and financially.

"It's a motivator to have them learn from Ocean Gate's (problems and) mistakes," said Ralph Avallone, CEO of the nonprofit Green Energy Council. "It gives municipal leaders the power to defuse myths about wind power. (Big steps like Ocean Gate's) always come from grass roots. Sometimes it's the small towns that make the federal government follow."

Avallone, whose organization claims that "green is the new red, white and blue," spoke about the importance of maintaining the planet for the rapidly growing population.

"In a world of finite power and land, how are we going to support billions more people?" he asked.

Charles Newcomb, managing director of operations for Entegry Wind Systems, flew in from Colorado to speak about different types of wind systems and the benefits of each type.

"Wind for communities is owned exclusively by communities to benefit community loads," said Newcomb, defining "small wind" as anything generating less than 100 kilowatts that is used for noncommercial purposes.

He said that New Jersey has many incentives for municipalities or residents who convert to wind power, and said that building a wind turbine could be ideal for anyone who feels pressured by rising energy costs, anyone facing a volatile energy market that makes budgeting difficult, and anyone who wants to experiment with a small-scale project.

Michael Mercurio from Island Wind said that small-wind energy has been beneficial in many locations, such as schools, government buildings and for municipal services.

"Each wind turbine symbolizes our freedom from foreign sources of energy," Mercurio said. "We need to plant the seed of tapping the resources of wind along our shoreline."

People opposed to wind power will often point to negative aspects, and Roger Dixon from Skylands Renewable Energy addressed several common myths that opponents will cite.

One of the most common complaints is that turbines are noisy, but Dixon showed how turbines produce far fewer decibels of sound than a standard office, stereo music or industrial noise.

He also pointed out that a common myth is that turbines harm wildlife, but showed a diagram from the "Summary of Anthropogenic Causes of Bird Mortality" showing that for every 10,000 birds killed by human activities, less than one death is caused by a wind turbine.

Other common myths include blades "throwing" ice, turbines creating a flickering light, interfering with television and radio signals or reducing property values.

Dave Most, mayor of Lacey, attended the summit and said that he was interested in energy-saving ideas.

"When it comes to our environment, I'm always proactive, and I think all the towns are looking to do what they can for the environment," Most said. "We don't necessarily have to build windmills or go solar right off the bat, but we need to be more efficient, change to fluorescent bulbs, and recycle."

Most said he believes that state regulations on wind power will become more user-friendly for municipalities as more of them express an interest in converting.

"It's important to learn from other towns and it's nice to work together," Most said. "The whole dynamic (in government) is changing and voters want governments to be held accountable. They just want the government to work more efficiently."

Councilman Steve Komsa of Beachwood said his town has had a wind assessment done and it shows promise. He found the information at the summit to be informative.

"It's important for communities to look at alternative energy, not just for the environment, but for tax stabilization," Komsa said. "It's outstanding that Mayor Kennedy took the initiative to do this. I think that once communities see other communities moving forward with it, they'll at least look into it more."