

VINEYARD GAZETTE

Archived Edition: Friday, March 18, 2011

When a Town Went Against the Wind

By MIKE SECCOMBE

You could summarize the plot of Laura Israel's movie *Windfall* to make it sound like a David-beats-Goliath, feel-good enviroflick.

A nasty power company intent on a big, new development has the leaders of a picturesque small town in its thrall. Local activists organize the good citizens and pull off an electoral coup, voting out the acquiescent town government and driving the corporate bad guys out of town.



Good, well-intentioned people on both sides find themselves opposed to each other.

That's the synopsis, but far from being a feel-good film, *Windfall* is ultimately a sad one, about the collision between naive good intentions and the uncomfortable practicalities of action to mitigate climate change.

The story behind the making of *Windfall* is very much a personal one for Ms. Israel, a long-time film editor but first time director who lives in Jersey City, works in New York, and also owns a place in Meredith, in upstate New York.

"It's a little log cabin," she explained this week. "There's not much entertainment up there, not much to do except chop wood and stay warm. I just go there to read and watch the stars."

It was while reading the local paper in early 2007 that she first noticed "mentions of wind power coming" to Meredith.

"Great," she thought. "I wanted a turbine on my property. I thought it would be a fantastic idea to make my own electricity."

Then she began to look into it, and to realize the scale of what was proposed — a network of 400-foot high turbines.

"I didn't think they would be so huge or so close. My initial excitement about the project turned into concern about my community. I started to talk to other people who felt the same way."

The idea of making a documentary about what was happening did not occur to her until later, back in New York, where she found herself working with a TV producer who was doing a segment on wind turbines. The segment acknowledged no downside to wind turbines.

When Ms. Israel suggested there was more to the story, things got heated.

“There was this whole big scene in the office,” she recalled. “He was shouting at me: ‘Do you want a coal plant? Do you want a nuclear plant?’

“And I realized that if he could not see the complexities of the issue, other people would not. They’re hard to explain. Immediately I thought I should look into it more. Then I thought, ‘This is a good thing to make a film about.’”

The film begins, as Ms. Israel herself did, with a rosy picture of wind generation. But the whole business of wind farming is portrayed more and more negatively as the movie progresses. There is the physical downside — the risk of “ice throw” from turbine blades, the light flicker, bat mortality, the accidents, the noise. There is the financial downside, a depiction of the way big institutions harvest depreciation allowances and other public money as they harvest wind. There is the legal/moral downside — the pressure brought to bear on townspeople to stifle opposition.

There is no point pretending *Windfall* is anything but one-eyed about the business of wind power generation. No effort is made to put the case in favor of wind generation.

But there is a second strand to the movie which is more nuanced and thought-provoking. That is the sociological strand.

We see the people of Meredith divided: the heated town meetings, the broken friendships. There are good, well-intentioned people on both sides, but it quickly becomes pretty clear there is something of a class divide, for want of a better term.

Much of the motivation for encouraging the turbine development was to save local farms, since dairying had become unprofitable. Much of the opposition came from people who made their money elsewhere and had come to Meredith as a retreat. The wind farm supporters wanted an income; the opponents wanted a lifestyle.

And, of course, everyone said they supported renewable energy, at least in principle.

“What a lot of people wanted in Meredith was a smaller program there,” said Ms. Israel. “They wanted something more appropriate for their community [but] they couldn’t control it. It was either what the wind developer wanted, or not. They chose not.

“That’s a sad part of the film. They were so excited about being a part of the solution, but in the end they just said no to everything,” she said.

Indeed, the story has become sadder over the three years since the new town board was sworn in, and implemented regulations making the wind farm untenable.

“Right after the wind issue went away, they were approached by natural gas companies who wanted to do gas fracking around Meredith,” she said.

Hydraulic fracturing, to give it its full name, is a process in which boreholes are drilled and a mixture of water and chemicals is pumped down them at high pressure to fracture rock formations and encourage the flow of natural gas. The controversial process has been linked to groundwater pollution and other environmental and human health concerns. On the other hand, gas is a much cleaner energy source than coal or oil.

“Meredith is where New York city gets its water from,” said Ms. Israel. “That’s what’s so crazy about the gas fracking. I can’t even put a septic system in my cabin, yet they can frack for gas.

“A lot of the same people [who opposed the wind farm] are now organized against that, so I think they are a bit overwhelmed. They’re not really thinking about how to do anything positive.”

But what positive things can be done? If fossil fuels cause global warming, if recent events in Japan have shown once again the dangers of nuclear power, if we oppose gas fracking, then what’s the solution if we also oppose wind power?

To this question, Ms. Israel had no solutions to offer, apart from a general view that there should be more focus on energy conservation. Then she reeled off again a long list of wind power’s shortcomings, both on land and at sea.

“You can’t just keep putting them up and pretending people aren’t having problems with them, because they really are,” she said.

“I wish I knew the answer.

“I think we all have to get more involved in being part of the solution. It means going to your town meetings, talking to other people, trying to decide what your environment is going to be,” she said.

If the Meredith example is anything to go by, that might be summed up in one word: warmer.

Reader Feedback

Friday, March 18, 2011 10:14pm

The federal plan for the ocean wind turbines is 3000 square miles. It's not clear if the fishermen will be allowed within the boundaries of the leased space. The fishermen will not be allowed at least during the construction in which construction could last the time of the "Big Dig." The fishermen feel that Homeland Security will declare a NO Fishing Zone for national security.

The news never picked up on the other 400 square miles of ocean near or in the state boundaries. This would then equal 3400 square miles.

<http://www.riedc.com/files/MA-RI-Wind-MOU-7-10.pdf>

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Governor Deval L. Patrick
Lieutenant Governor Timothy P. Murray
Secretary Ian A. Bowles
Press Release Contacts: Lisa Capone — 617-626-1119 or lisa.capone@state.ma.us;
Catherine Williams — 617-626-1809 or Catherine.williams@state.ma.us
Governors Patrick and Carcieri Sign Agreement on Offshore Wind
Energy Development

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by both governors commits their states to coordinate and collaborate in potential development of offshore wind energy in a 400 square mile “area of mutual interest” beginning 12 miles southwest of Martha’s Vineyard and extending 20

miles westward into Rhode Island Sound.

- Frank Haggerty , Mattapoissett

Email a link to this article

to:
from:



© 2011 Vineyard Gazette