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Bethany residents wary of Bluewater power cable

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BETHANY BEACH -- Many residents of this quaint beach town say they are all for green energy, but when Bluewater Wind officials came to town with a concept plan to bring the power cable from their proposed offshore wind farm under their beach, boardwalk and bandstand, they had one really big question: What's in it for the town?

After all, some figured even the best-designed cable -- protected as it likely would be inside some sort of high-tech conduit -- will fail at some point. When that happens, it means two things: a big hole with lots of traffic congestion and disruptions in the town's main business thoroughfare.

"We're talking a major hole here," said Frank Loppatto, a retired engineer and town resident.

Loppatto said he also was concerned that the proposal, outlined at a public meeting earlier this month, was sketchy.

"They admitted they didn't have the details yet," he said.

Bluewater's Delaware project director, Rob Propes, said the proposal presented to town officials and residents was one of three options for getting the power produced at the planned offshore wind farm near Rehoboth Beach into the power grid.

The three options include the one through Bethany, which would follow Garfield Parkway to Kent Avenue on the west side of Del. 1. There, the cable would come above ground and follow existing rights of way to the Indian River Power Plant.

A second option would come ashore at the private beach community of Middlesex Beach; the third would come ashore at Little Assawoman Bay and along the Assawoman Canal.

Each involves reaching agreements with state, municipal and private landowners -- and in some cases all three -- to move the power to a place when it can be used.

The idea, Propes said, was to share the concept with the community. Before anything could happen, the company would need to undertake an economic and environmental feasibility assessment of the possible routes, he said.

"My impression, overall, [is] I got a very favorable reaction," he said. "I didn't sense any strong concern."

Experts inside and outside Delaware have said the Bluewater project -- if successful -- could spark others to attempt offshore wind, which would reduce or eliminate carbon dioxide emitted from power plants

Progress, but money needed

Bluewater, which plans to build about 66 turbines here, has a contract with Delmarva Power to supply up to 220 megawatts from the ocean tract east of Rehoboth Beach.

But before it can build the Delaware wind farm, it needs financial backing. Bankers have seized control of its parent company, Babcock and Brown of Australia, which was supposed to be the primary financial backer. Bluewater is working with Credit Suisse, an international investment house, to find potential investors.

Meanwhile, Bluewater recently received federal permission to install meteorological towers at the proposed wind farm locations off the Delaware and New Jersey coasts.

The company still needs a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before that work can begin, he said.

"It will allow us to confirm what we believe is a very good source of wind out there," he said.

The towers will be built at the same height as the proposed wind turbines and will be equipped with monitoring devices to assess wind data, waves and current. The wave and current data will be used to design the turbine support structures, he said. In addition, specialized radar will be used to determine what impact the towers could have on birds, he said.

Propes said the data will be collected for at least five years but a year's worth of data should satisfy potential investors and design engineers.

The next step, expected in August, is for the company to apply for federal leases for the wind park, he said. Before that can happen, a federal notice advertising the availability of the leases must be published in the Federal Register, he said.

Bethany Beach Mayor Tony McClenny said that in general, people in the town seem to support alternative and green energy alternatives. Garfield Parkway and Kent Avenue are both owned and maintained by the state, he said.

But the town does own a small stretch of the proposed cable path -- the area under the boardwalk and the bandstand, he said.

McClenny said that there were very few complaints during the presentation that some 40 town residents attended.

"A lot of people want to make sure the town is compensated in some way," said Lewis Killmer, chairman of the town zoning commissions.

One possibility is that municipal officials could piggyback the cabling operation and bury municipal utilities at the same time Bluewater is tunneling their cabling, he said.

The town, as part of a downtown streetscape project, is looking at burying the above-ground utilities.

Killmer said that between the utility poles and the stay cables that support them, they take a lot of space on the sidewalks.

If the town could piggyback Bluewater's project, the savings could be significant -- somewhere around \$1 million, Killmer estimated.

Meanwhile, residents such as Loppatto still have questions about the details of the project.

"I'm wondering how much this is going to cost," he said.
