



Vermont is making a mess of energy.
Vermont is making a mess of its
response to climate change.
It doesn't have to be this way.

Shove It Down Their Throats

Vermont has adopted some ambitious energy goals. The state could have engaged its communities in achieving these goals, but it did not. Instead, it has turned things over to energy developers, many of whom are running roughshod over our communities. They are poisoning the well of public opinion, turning community after community against renewable energy and against state government itself.

I am not going out on a limb by declaring that Vermont will fail to meet its energy goals. The state's policies are anti-environmental and anti-democratic. They empower the developers and disempower communities.

They guarantee that there will be a backlash that will capsize the entire energy program. The reaction to the "shove it down their throats 'til they like it"

strategy is going to be a huge factor in the 2016 elections.

You might get away with shoving one project down the throat of one community. But, Vermont's energy plan relies on distributed electricity generation in all of our communities. Can you shove projects down all their throats? Our state government thinks so.

Poorly-sited energy projects and poor treatment by developers have sparked an open rebellion in dozens of communities. These communities resent the state-sanctioned wrecking crews that cut forests, compromise

wetlands, abuse agricultural lands, ignore municipal plans, defy town governments, and bully the neighbors. More communities will rebel as the wrecking crews, following scent of free government money, find new places to run amok.

The Northeast Kingdom town of Morgan just joined the rebellion. Their selectboard held an informational meeting to discuss a plan for a 500kW solar facility on a hillside that overlooks Seymour Lake. At the end of the meeting, residents and property owners voted 62 to 7 to oppose the project. They felt like they were being pushed around and lied to—they didn't like it.

If your legislators don't respect Vermont's communities, then you need new ones. Now is the perfect time to start looking for candidates.

A smart developer would have engaged Morgan in a discussion about project size, siting, screening, and community participation in the project. It may well be

that the town would have welcomed such a project as a true community effort and a source of municipal pride.

But, the developer was David Blittersdorf and that's not how he operates. He told the people in Morgan that he would not respect their vote, would not "buy a hundred trees" to screen the project, and that he might decide to put industrial wind turbines on his recently-purchased Morgan ridgeline. He also told them that he had an agreement to sell electricity from the Morgan project to Jay Peak. The Caledonian Record reports that Blittersdorf has no such agreement.

Mr. Blittersdorf's reputation preceded him to Morgan. He is known for his campaign contributions and for being one of the prime beneficiaries of the state's energy policies. He is known for erecting a wind measurement tower in nearby Irasburg without bothering to apply for a permit. He is known for advocating the depopulation of rural areas (like Morgan) and the destruction of 200 miles of Vermont ridgeline to accommodate industrial wind turbines.

Blittersdorf's history of being a bad neighbor is also well known. He abused the neighbors of his Georgia Mountain wind project by blasting fly-rock onto their properties, obtaining a court order to keep them from using their own land, and endangering them with illegal blasting. Adding insult to injury, Blittersdorf intruded upon an on-line support group for sick turbine neighbors, where he mocked, and taunted them. On his own Facebook page, he described retrofitting his turbines with "trunk monkeys" and posted a video of the beatings they would administer to people who opposed his projects.

Can you blame the folks in Morgan for being suspicious of David Blittersdorf?

If your town has land and power lines, then you can expect a visit from the wrecking crew. When the wrecking crew comes to your town, you may discover that they've been conspiring for months with the state to surprise you with their project. For some reason, they prefer to surprise your community with a bad project rather than cooperate with you to develop a good one. It is a sad irony that so many of these bad projects contain the word "community" in their names.

What needs to happen in order for us to turn our energy program around? Three things:

First, Governor Shumlin has to make good on his promise to protect towns. In 2012, the governor told Kristen Carlson (then at WCAX), "I have always said and I will always say I believe that no energy project should be built in a town in Vermont where the residents of that community don't vote affirmatively to host it. We shouldn't send them into towns that don't want them." Since the governor will always say this, he should say it now. And he should call off the wrecking crews.

Second, we need to replace legislators who promote "shove it down their throats." Check the record. If your legislator doesn't respect our communities, then you need a new legislator. Now is the perfect time to start looking for candidates.

Third, energy siting is a land-use issue and it should be subject to Act 250. For over forty years, Act 250 has protected the Vermont landscape, elevated the importance of municipal and regional planning, and accorded respect to our citizens and communities. We have never needed it more.

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This commentary was written by Mark Whitworth, who is on the board of Energize Vermont, which advocates sensible energy policies for Vermont. It appeared in Vermont news outlets in October, 2015.