

Bill Cundiff

From: Robert Anders
Sent: Wednesday, June 08, 2011 5:04 PM
To: wCundiff@DouglasMa.org; SZisk@douglasma.org; Mlajoie@douglasma.org
Subject: falmouth meeting

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June 8, 2011
Massachusetts

Turbine talk: New state panel to study health effects

By Craig Salters, FALMOUTH BULLETIN, www.wickedlocal.com 8 June 2011

Falmouth selectmen organized a Monday night forum to discuss the issue of wind turbines and received a standing-room-only crowd of state and local officials, expert consultants and mostly angry residents.

Discussions of noise, low frequency noise, shadow flicker, proper setback distances and possible health effects from the turbines dominated during the more than three-hour meeting.

The final portion of the meeting was reserved for the comments of abutters to the town's Wind 1 turbine at the Falmouth Wastewater Treatment Facility. Those residents shared stories of sleepless nights, headaches and other ill effects they say are brought on by the turbine. Regardless of this or that study, they told the board, there is a problem with the nearly 400-foot, 1.65-megawatt turbine, which has been operational for more than a year but is now curtailed during strong winds in a nod to residents.

"Clearly there is a problem. We are not complaining just to complain," Blacksmith Shop Road resident Dick Nugent told selectmen after pointing to the packed auditorium at the Morse Pond School. "We don't expect you to have all the answers but we do expect you to take it and run with it."

The entire auditorium received a bit of news early in the meeting when Steven Clarke, assistant secretary at the state's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, announced that a panel will be formed this week to specifically study any health effects regarding the sounds from wind turbines. That panel will be comprised of representatives of the state's Department of Environmental Protection and its Department of Public Health.

"Right now, the focus is on sound," Clarke told the audience.

Regarding possible health effects, Gail Harkness, chairwoman of the Falmouth Board of Health, said that board has been meeting with concerned residents for the past year and now receives bi-weekly updates at its regular meetings. She said reported health effects include sleep disturbances, fatigue, headaches and nausea. The board has created a database of information on the issue and has also developed a wind turbine complaint and/or comment form which will be available online.

Patricia Kerfoot, chairwoman of the planning board, lauded the town for its decision to have a one-year moratorium on new wind turbine projects while more