

Commentary

By Robert Keough, assistant secretary for communications and public affairs in the state Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

Recent *Gazette* articles on the state's draft ocean management plan have raised questions about the state's draft ocean management plan, especially the renewable energy opportunities it identifies for Massachusetts waters. On behalf of Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Ian Bowles, I would like to address a couple of them – namely, alleged “new” powers granted the Energy Facilities Siting Board to override local authority, and whether the Martha's Vineyard community will have a meaningful role in potential development of wind energy off its shores.

First, neither the Oceans Act of 2008 nor the draft ocean management plan grants any new powers to the Energy Facilities Siting Board. More than 30 years ago, the Legislature vested the Siting Board with the authority to balance all public interests and make final decisions in the event that local, regional or state agency decisions unreasonably prohibited needed energy facilities. Every state has such an entity, to ensure that the lights stay on, even when no one wants to live near a power plant. That said, the Siting Board under Governor Patrick has adopted many procedural reforms and given due deference to local officials, recently declining a petition to override local zoning rules in the case of a proposed power plant in Brockton.

Second, the draft ocean plan is the result of a far-reaching stakeholder process involving nearly 100 meetings and public hearings and the input of a statutorily designated Advisory Commission, which includes the Martha's Vineyard Commission. But that is by no means the end of public engagement in the process. Discussions about siting a wind energy facility in the vicinity of Martha's Vineyard must and will engage the island community fully – likely in the form of a state and local working group, going forward as the process shifts from planning to implementation. We look forward to starting the conversation with the public hearing scheduled for Wednesday, September 23, at 6 p.m. at the Katharine Cornell Theater in Tisbury.

It's also important to be clear about what the draft ocean plan proposes for renewable energy. The draft plan identifies two categories of wind projects, community-scale and commercial-scale. For community-scale projects of 10 or fewer turbines, the plan gives the Martha's Vineyard Commission (along with other coastal regional planning agencies) the controlling voice in determining whether, where, and how the project may be developed, with a requirement that the host community formally support and receive a benefit from the project before it goes forward.

Commercial-scale wind projects of 11 or more go through an exclusionary screening process that identifies areas that have capacity to make a meaningful contribution to our statutory renewable energy mandates with the least potential impact to natural resources and existing human uses. For the draft plan, that process resulted in identification of two areas off Cuttyhunk and Noman's Land Island for designation as renewable energy areas. Frankly, it surprised us as much as anyone else that virtually the rest of the Massachusetts coastline was too busy with fishing and navigation, too critical for marine and avian species, or had water too deep to accommodate renewable energy development. But that is what our review, with much input from scientists and natural resource agencies, told us, and that is what we have put out for public comment in the draft plan.

That said, our goal off Martha's Vineyard or anywhere else is to develop wind energy projects that move the Commonwealth toward its clean energy goals but are also sensitive to local interests. The draft ocean plan requires any commercial-scale renewable energy project to provide "direct economic benefits" to the host community. "Direct economic benefit" could mean electricity distributed directly to the island, a specified annual economic return, or island ownership of some portion of the project, among other possibilities, as determined by local communities.

We recognize that the draft ocean plan raises many questions. We look forward to presenting additional information on the 23rd and hearing from island residents, as we consider how to best manage the great asset we have in our state waters for posterity.