

## **Steadily Chipping Away at Environmental Protection**

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Environmental laws are hard won, especially those that do not directly benefit human safety or health. They are hacked out inch by inch by citizen complaint against a jungle of opposition and indifference. From my observation, no governmental body ever got up in the morning determined to preserve wetlands or rare species. Even the U.S. Supreme Court looks down its nose at wetlands protection.

Nevertheless these grassroots laws, once established, become popular with the general public. Those who wish their demise therefore clothe their wolfish efforts in the sheep's clothing of virtue. Right now, virtue in the environmental movement is embodied in the concept of fighting climate change, so we can expect - and are already seeing - high-minded attempts to weaken environmental protection in the name of saving the environment.

The Green Communities Act passed last summer is proving a prolific source of these efforts. Among other things, it established the Mass. Energy Facilities Siting Commission. The commission held its first meeting early in December where Ian Bowles, secretary of the Executive Office of Energy and the Environment (in that order), defined its role as "changing the landscape for siting renewable projects" in the state.

The group considered:

- Whether current laws facilitate renewable energy facilities siting.
- Whether current laws favor fossil fuel plants.
- Whether there should be "as of right" siting for renewable energy development in industrial zones.

Predictably, the outcome of the discussion that followed, according to the minutes, was that the state and local permit processes are problematic, lengthy and unpredictable; that local ordinances and bylaws are a major roadblock; and that "one stop shopping" is essential to streamlining the siting.

This meeting, and these conclusions, are clearly related to two controversial projects facing local resistance: the Hoosac wind project and the Russell biomass plant. Never mind that the wind project was held up, not because of the turbines but because the road built to transport them violated the wetlands act; and the biomass plant vastly overestimates our available supply of clean wood waste, will use more water than the Westfield River can really afford, and will burden the town with truck traffic that offended even the Energy Department. No more of that sort of roadblock, folks. You can bet that the state's Onestop Shop will not involve

any tiresome Environmental Impact Reports from the MEPA office. And the "as of right" provision would open up undeveloped "industrial" areas with a lot of wetlands fiddle-dee-dee as EOEEA and DEP cooperate in making "comprehensive changes to existing policies" that will also probably make it OK to site energy projects on protected "Article 97" lands.

While the auto companies and everyone else get till 2020 to get their acts together, apparently Massachusetts cannot afford the time and effort to assure that its renewable energy projects will not harm the environment, pollute the air and water, and consume open space in the second most densely developed state in the nation.

EOEEA needs to get back to its roots and protect the environment.

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