

success and failure.”

Take a look at the small collection of Waisman’s paintings that are currently on display in the cantina at Casa Que Pasa—which also happens to her place of business—and you’ll see the true-life tales inherent in her pieces.

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MUSIC

Marcy Playground

Sex + Candy = One-Hit Wonder

By Carey Ross · Wednesday, June 9, 2010



What do Blind Melon, the Archies, and Falco have in common?

Easy question, right? They’re all one-hit wonders—Blind Melon for “No Rain,” the Archies for “Sugar Sugar,” and Falco for, of course, “Rock Me Amadeus.”

If you wanted to, you could also add New York’s Marcy Playground to that list for their 1997 hit “Sex and Candy.” After all, they’re coming to Bellingham—for a Thurs., June 10 show at the Wild Buffalo—and they’re bringing their megahit with them.

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NEWS

A Mighty Wind

Community concerns create a hurdle for clean energy systems

By Tim Johnson · Wednesday, June 9, 2010



Perhaps the biggest barrier to moving away from distant oil fields and leaking tankers and risky coal mines and tangled electrical grids for our energy needs is... the solutions may end up in our backyards.

Neighbors and policymakers were alarmed in February when a local energy entrepreneur came forward with a plan to site large-scale wind energy towers on Squalicum Mountain. Whatcom County Council moved quickly to halt that effort. Council passed an emergency moratorium, followed by a more permanent restriction in April that will hold until new rules can be crafted.

Now policymakers are returning to the drafting table to harness the wind.

“A lot of people think that all of Washington’s electricity is clean because of our big hydro,” Alex Ramel explained. Ramel, the energy policy manager for Sustainable Connections, has been studying energy systems and local energy initiatives since he graduated from Western’s Huxley College of the Environment in 2005.

“The truth is that we’ve outgrown our capacity to provide for all of our electricity demand with hydro,” Ramel said. “A big piece of the pie is from the coal plant in Centralia and most of the new electricity sources that have been brought on line in recent decades are natural gas, including four plants in Whatcom County. Several years back, there was a huge local debate about a proposed fifth, Sumas 2, which was opposed largely because of air pollution concerns and the health impacts there.

“It is pretty evident that our current fossil fuel dependence is destructive of the oceans and the atmosphere, and is foolish foreign policy and costly in every sense of the word,” Ramel said. “If we are going to change that, we need to employ a healthy mix of renewable technologies and energy efficiency.”

The nation’s wind turbines generate enough electricity to power the equivalent of 9.7 million homes, according to a trade industry report. Last year, Texas consolidated its lead as the nation’s top wind producer, with a total capacity of 9,410 megawatts, about three times more than the second-largest producer, Iowa. They were followed by California and Washington.

Community reaction to proposed renewable energy generation systems remain a significant portion of the challenge in bringing renewable, sustainable systems online. When engineer Terry Meyer—owner of the Bellingham-based Cascade Community Wind development firm—approached neighbors on Squalicum Mountain, he was aware of this challenge.

“The risk that something might impact an aesthetic value neighbors hold—a view—is often greater than the assurance that they will begin to solve some of their own and the world’s problems,” Meyer said. “That’s the tragedy of the Commons—’Wind is great, let’s put it somewhere else.’

“It’s a NIMBY issue,” he admitted, “but it is also a universal issue. These concerns pop up everywhere.”

“Property owners on Squalicum Mountain were concerned and talked to their elected representatives, and their elected representatives responded,” Whatcom County Council member Ken Mann related. “I did not vote in favor of the emergency moratorium personally, because I think it sent the wrong message to the business community investing in alternative energy, but as far as the process of the moratorium went, that is, I think, how representative democracy is supposed to work.”

Mann explained the county’s original plans for accommodating wind power were flawed. The 2008 ordinance defining these rules was developed while Mann served on the county planning commission.

“When the original ordinance came through,” Mann said, “it was very much geared toward small, personal power generation on a property that might perhaps be shared with neighbors. I don’t recall much discussion at all on whether the ordinance would allow for 400-foot-tall wind turbines. I think that is fair to say.

“Language allowed it,” he said, “but I’m not sure that was the intent or that anyone really contemplated that. I think the new ordinance will have a much more comprehensive, rigorous process and clearly defined setbacks, and testing mechanisms to make sure these projects are sited correctly.”

The revised ordinance, which Mann’s committee hopes to bring forward this summer, will be more restrictive.

“The ordinance passed in 2008 related to wind energy systems generally,” Ramel explained. “Community wind is about who owns the project and how it is capitalized, not the type of tower. The permitting process probably shouldn’t distinguish based on who owns the system.”

Ramel said certain restrictions on these systems are reasonable, particularly as they relate to health and safety.

“There is a fear that windmills can cause adverse health impacts on neighbors,” Ramel said. “If that is true, and if it wasn’t known or contemplated when the 2008 ordinance was passed, then an emergency moratorium is fully appropriate.

“What is important to understand,” he cautioned, “is that the actual scientific evidence to support these claims of adverse health impacts is really scarce.”

“The most recent fear is ‘wind turbine syndrome,’” Meyer explained, “the idea that mysterious vibrations can make you sick—and if you squint just right, maybe you could see a correlation. There’s enough scientific facts scattered through the story and enough pseudo-science to try to connect it all that it has gained some traction for a little while. Just like, ‘wind turbines slaughter birds.’ That was another huge concern and, you know, there was one instance where a wind farm did.”

Other concerns a new ordinance may attempt to address include the size, noise and proximity of these systems to residents.

“A good ordinance would address those concerns as well, but not with the same zero tolerance that it should have for any potential health and safety risks,” Ramel said.

Part of the challenge in keeping these systems away from people, Mann admitted, is the county has not been rigorous enough in its protection of resource land.

“We’ve for too long had rural land use policies that have allowed people to move out into areas that should remain resource lands,” Mann said. “Sometimes it’s farmland, where new residents complain of smell or slow tractors, sounds at night—these are the inevitable consequences of when residential development encroaches on resource-based uses. I’ve wanted to be serious about stopping that trend, and this is a good example for me.”

“Wind turbines are only economical where there is enough reliable wind, and where there is adequate access to connect to the electric grid,” Ramel explained. “This creates a pretty significant constraint as it is. Even if such an ordinance doesn’t outright forbid projects, it could make it hard enough to find the handful of potentially feasible projects that there wouldn’t be any reason for a developer to spend their time prospecting here. There is lots of opportunity elsewhere.”

“It makes sense to have some sort of an aesthetic buffer,” Meyer agreed. “You don’t own the view, but a tower does create an impact, and so where you draw that line is an arbitrary rule that is up to a council to make. But it needs to be in scale,” he cautioned.

“There are some counties in the country that have setbacks of a half a mile, and in those counties there are no wind turbines,” Meyer said, because there is always someone living in that range. “They’ve basically created rules for siting wind turbines in this county that basically mean no wind turbines will be sited in this county.”

Ramel agreed.

“One of the members of the working group advising the council on this did an analysis of 13 other communities that have setbacks greater than three times tower height and found that no utility-scale turbines had been put up in any these communities,” he said. “I don’t see any reason that we wouldn’t get similar results here.”

A Chilly Wind

The chilling effect of poor planning and policy on the development of new renewable energy systems are profound, Ramel explained.

“The biggest challenge for renewable energy projects is financing. Clean energy has to compete with fossil fuels that get to pollute, to a large extent, for free. The marginal price of electricity in this part of the county is based on the price of natural gas; generally if you can’t compete with that price, you can’t get financed.

“Small entrepreneurs are the best source of innovation,” he continued. “And when the community owns it, as with Terry’s projects, there is a natural stewardship that comes from the owners caring about the place that they live and their neighbors. There is a natural gravitation toward triple-bottom-line business management,” Ramel said.

Ramel added that big, distant projects lose an average of 7 percent of their energy in transmission.

“That’s a big cost we should be trying to avoid,” he said. “This is a profitable, growing industry that provides high-quality jobs, and I’d rather not let only the big, out-of-town companies capture all of the value.”

But perhaps this concern has been expressed too late.

“I’ve stopped everything in Whatcom County,” Meyer admitted. “I’ve lost money here. People are too willing to defend their lifestyle against the benefits of clean energy.

“The current wind maps say maybe Whatcom County has a good wind resource. Right now, where I know we could put wind turbines in that would be successful are places like Squalicum Mountain, Galbraith Mountain, Cherry Point. But those areas are increasingly surrounded by urban development.

“In Kittitas County, an area with a much better wind resource, I knew they’d had some battles with wind farms,” Meyer said. “Over the last year, we’ve been working on a wind ordinance there, and all of these same issues have come up. There are websites that are set up to straight up provide information to neighbors to stop or stall these projects.

“Typically,” Meyer said, “good science... common sense... reality... win the day, but it can take a year. It has taken a year in Kittitas County. In Whatcom County, they had the foresight to pass something ahead of time. Then the council changed and the right people screamed bloody murder and now who knows what we’re going to get. So good on us for trying to get ahead of this, but maybe we needed a little more trial by fire.”

Ferndale’s High School, BTC, and WWU are all trying to prepare students to thrive in the renewable energy field, Ramel noted.

“BTC and Ferndale High both have small-scale wind energy systems going in so that students can learn about them firsthand. It would be a real shame to be making this investment to train them to do jobs that will only be in other counties,” he said.

“The potential for the lack of regulatory certainty to frighten Terry and other entrepreneurs (and their financiers) out of our community is my biggest concern,” Ramel said. “I think that the county government gets that and they have expressed a desire to ‘get it right’ this time and to do so on a relatively quick timeline. I am hopeful that this will succeed.”

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