

The New York Times

The Hamptons Love Green Energy. But That Wind Farm?

The transmission line would go through an area where homeowners include the billionaire Ronald Lauder and Marci Klein, daughter of Calvin Klein.

By **Debra West**

Sept. 14, 2019

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EAST HAMPTON, N.Y. — This affluent enclave on the East End of Long Island is steeped in eco-conscious pride, with strict water quality and land preservation rules and an abundance of electric cars on the roads.

So at first, many happily embraced a plan for an offshore wind farm that would help lead the way as New York State sets some of the most ambitious green energy goals in the country.

But then came word that the project's transmission cable was going to land in Wainscott, one of the most exclusive slices of the already exclusive Hamptons, where homeowners include the likes of the cosmetics billionaire Ronald Lauder and Marci Klein, a former longtime producer of "Saturday Night Live" and the daughter of Calvin Klein.

Soon a push to protect the planet was out and the imperative to protect a golden plot of sand was in. Homeowners organized and hired an army of lawyers, lobbyists, public relations experts and engineers to argue their case.

"Some in our community, most in our community maybe, are understandably enamored with wind power," John Finley, a Wainscott resident and the chief legal counsel for the Blackstone Group, the financial firm, said at a public hearing this summer before state regulators. "And it is part of the solution."

Still, he added, "their zeal for wind power need not be exclusive with picking the best available landing site. Some view the landing site as a detail in the big picture of addressing climate control. But it is not a detail where the landing site is. My home is not a detail."



Wainscott is home to many affluent homeowners, some of whom oppose having the transmission cable landing site in their neighborhood. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

Not everyone agrees.

Michael Hansen, whose family has been in Wainscott for 300 years, is baffled by the opposition, having seen the effect that a rising sea is having on the region, undermining docks and sweeping away beach sand.

“It is absolutely shameless,” said Mr. Hansen, a website developer and property manager. “They don’t live out here year-round. Their kids don’t go to school in Wainscott. They’re only out here on weekends.”

Now the developer of the wind farm may turn to an alternate landing site, bringing the cable ashore in Hither Hills in Montauk, a popular state park, and then burying it for nearly 12 miles before connecting it to a substation. Landing the cable in Wainscott would require a journey of about four miles.

In Montauk, resentment is building among some residents over the idea that they may be forced to accept the cable landing because of a campaign mounted by the deep-pocketed in Wainscott.

“That’s always the irony in these things: ‘It’s a great idea and we want it, but don’t do it here,’” said Paul Monte, the president of the Montauk Chamber of Commerce. “If it disrupts things for the lesser folks that’s O.K., but just don’t do it to our road.”

Montauk, of course, has plenty of its own millionaires, and residents there have started organizing to oppose the Hither Hills site.

“I just hope cooler heads will prevail,” Mr. Monte said, “and they will choose the location that makes the best sense and not base it on who has hired the more powerful lawyers.”

State regulators will ultimately choose the landing site, but the Wainscott site would also need the approval from two local town panels. The Montauk site, because it is a state park, would not require any local approval.

With 15 turbines to be placed in waters 35 miles east of Montauk Point, the project — a joint venture between Danish and Connecticut companies — aims to ease an annual summer energy shortage in East Hampton and Southampton, while helping the towns reach their goal of 100 percent renewable energy.

But at a time when New York State has made offshore wind power the centerpiece of an energy plan that calls for 70 percent of electricity to come from renewable sources by 2030, the fight in the Hamptons could be a cautionary tale.

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“If we can’t get this done here, I don’t know,” said Peter Van Scoyoc, the supervisor of the Town of East Hampton, which includes Wainscott and Montauk, and who has put solar panels on his house. “We want clean energy.”

Earlier generations of offshore wind farms were doomed by public objections to blighted vistas. Today’s wind turbines are bigger, generate more kilowatts and can be placed out of view from the shoreline.

“It’s been sold on the basis of falsehoods,” said David Gruber, a retired finance executive who is running for East Hampton town supervisor on a stop-the-wind-farm platform.
Johnny Milano for The New York Times

A number of offshore wind farms have been proposed along the East Coast, some of which have also provoked controversy. The federal government delayed the approval of a project off Massachusetts, saying the developer needed to study the cumulative effect of the many proposed wind farms in the area.

Orsted, the Danish company helping develop the wind farm off Montauk Point, also built the country’s first offshore wind farm near Rhode Island and is one of the companies behind a much larger project, a wind farm off Long Island that would provide electricity to 500,000 homes. The Montauk wind farm would power to 70,000 homes.

In the Hamptons, Clint Plummer, Orsted’s head of market strategies and new projects, said the company held 17 community meetings before choosing Wainscott as the preferred landing site.

“We understand that people will provide more feedback the more real that project becomes,” Mr. Plummer said. “We don’t fear that. That’s a good thing.”

The project, which would involve burying a high voltage cable 30 feet under the beach and below roads, also requires a federal permit, and the company is hoping to start construction next year. The work would be done from November to March, to coincide with the off-season in the Hamptons.

An alternate landing site would be at Hither Hills State Park in Montauk.
Johnny Milano for The New York Times

One group opposing the Wainscott site, Citizens for the Preservation of Wainscott, was founded by Alex Edlich, a senior partner at McKinsey & Company, the consulting firm, and his wife, Gouri Orekondy Edlich. Its members fear disruption to a residential neighborhood and the impact the drilling and roadwork could have on its rural farm character, which they have worked hard to preserve.

“I took my kids door to door because we couldn’t understand why the Town Board rushed to accept this company’s desire to target our small, rural community with an industrial project,” Ms. Edlich said in an emailed statement.

The citizens group hired engineers who proposed yet a third cable option to state regulators — through Hither Hills but with a shorter route to a substation, which they said would cause less disruption to neighborhoods or busy roads.

As an inducement, Orsted has offered East Hampton \$8.2 million for community development projects if the Wainscott site is approved.

The cable has also become an election issue, dividing candidates running for the Town Board in November.

“Those running for office are trying to enlist those who are opposed to form a coalition,” said Mr. Van Scoyoc, a Democrat.

David Gruber, a retired finance executive who is challenging Mr. Van Scoyoc, is running on a stop-the-wind-farm platform.

“I’m skeptical of everything about it because I know it’s been sold on the basis of falsehoods,” said Mr. Gruber, who is running on the Independence Party line. “It’s no surprise that when the governor said, ‘This is the way we’re going to go,’ that all the Democrats got in line.”

“We have a resource that could start drawing down the use of fossil fuels, and people come up with all sorts of reasons to be against it,” said Jessica James, who helped start a group to back the wind farm. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

As the anti-wind-farm voices have gotten louder in Wainscott and Montauk, environmentalists have taken note.

“We were blindsided by the opposition, and we were very surprised that it started to catch fire,” said Jessica James, who designed her own green home in Montauk — with solar power, geothermal heating and cooling, and using locally sourced and recycled materials.

In response, she helped start a counter group to support the project, Win With Wind, that favors the Wainscott landing.

“We have a resource that could start drawing down the use of fossil fuels, and people come up with all sorts of reasons to be against it,” Ms. James said. “If this project were to fail because they could not pass muster with all the agencies involved, so be it. But if this winds up not getting done just because someone has enough money to keep it in court indefinitely, it’s going to be a very sad day for the future of green energy.”

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A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 14, 2019, Section A, Page 20 of the New York edition with the headline: Welcoming Green Power In Hamptons Enclaves, Until It’s Time to Build