

U.S.

Vermont Wind Project Needs Support, So Company Offers to Pay Voters

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE OCT. 12, 2016

WINDHAM, Vt. — To many residents in this tiny town in southern Vermont, the last-minute offer of cash was a blatant attempt to buy their votes.

To the developer that offered the money, it was simply a sign of how attentively the company had been listening to voters' concerns.

The company, Iberdrola Renewables, a Spanish energy developer, wants to build Vermont's largest wind project on a private forest tract that spans Windham and the adjacent town of Grafton. The project would consist of 24 turbines, each nearly 500 feet tall, and generate 82.8 megawatts of power, enough to light 42,000 homes for a year if the wind kept blowing, though the houses could be in Connecticut or Massachusetts.

Residents of the two towns will vote Nov. 8 on whether to approve the project, which has pitted neighbor against neighbor. No one knows which way the vote will go.

That same day, residents statewide will be voting for governor. Wind development has become an issue in that race, which The Cook Political Report rates a tossup, and sentiment here could be decisive in the outcome.

Facing the possibility that voters here may reject the proposal, putting a damper on

large-scale wind development in Vermont, Iberdrola last week put cash on the table for individual voters.

Many residents called the offer an attempt at undue influence, if not an outright bribe. But after a review, the state attorney general's office said that the offer did not appear to violate state law.

Still, the individual payments — a total of \$565,000 a year to 815 registered voters in both towns, or \$14.1 million over 25 years — on top of millions more to the towns, suggest how much is at stake for the company. Iberdrola has been trying to persuade voters here for more than four years to approve the project, in a state that is actively seeking clean-energy development.

Vermont's energy goals are among the most ambitious in the country: to derive 90 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2050.

Gov. Peter Shumlin, a Democrat who is not seeking re-election after nearly six years in office, has been the state's chief proponent of clean energy.

“There's nothing I'm more proud of than my legacy of having helped to get Vermont off of oil and coal and moved us more aggressively than any other state in the nation to renewables,” he said.

The state has 20 times as much wind power as it had when he took office and 11 times the number of solar panels. Electricity rates in Vermont have dropped while soaring in the rest of New England.

Yet the push toward renewables has been a tough sell in some quarters despite Vermont's reputation as a progressive, environmentally conscious state — or perhaps because of it.

Critics of commercial wind power consider themselves every bit as environmentally conscious as the governor. They say he is doing more harm than good by promoting developments on the state's ridgelines, among Vermont's most important assets, where turbines, roadways and infrastructure are destroying

habitats, increasing flood risks and scarring the landscape much the way mountaintop mining has scarred West Virginia. They also complain about noise, lower property values and blighted views.

Critics are appalled that Mr. Shumlin is backing another Iberdrola project, a 15-turbine development under construction on two ridgelines in the Green Mountain National Forest that would be the first commercial wind project in a national forest.

All of this development, they say, is doing little to stave off climate change.

“These handful of turbines won’t do anything to offset the documented scampering increase in the mining and use of coal in India and China,” said Frank Seawright, the chairman of the Windham Selectboard and an opponent of the project.

Mr. Shumlin counters by saying that climate change is easily the most important issue facing the planet and that everyone has a responsibility to curb it. While he says he would never favor turbines on Vermont’s most iconic mountains, naming Mansfield and Camel’s Hump, he adds that they have to go on ridgelines because that is where the wind is.

The state’s environmental groups are with him. Paul Burns, the executive director of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group, said that a vote against the wind project here “would demonstrate an unwillingness to be part of a solution to what is recognized as an incredibly serious problem.”

Vermont’s battle over wind has been brewing for years, and is playing a role in the race to succeed Mr. Shumlin. Phil Scott, the Republican nominee, who opposes further industrial wind development, faces Sue Minter, the Democratic nominee, who is backed by the wind industry and favors it. The issue was a factor in her winning the Democratic nomination.

Statewide support for wind turbines has been relatively high, but appears to have ebbed in recent years, according to polling by Castleton University, dropping

to 56 percent this year from 69 percent in 2013.

Windham and Grafton generally vote Democratic, but most lawn signs here proclaim support for Mr. Scott and are paired with signs against the wind turbines.

“A lot of Democrats in this room will be voting for a Republican governor for the first time,” Sally Hoover, 72, a retired accountant in Windham, said last week as Iberdrola hosted a meeting, where residents first learned of the cash offer.

At the meeting, which drew more than 100 residents, the developer shared its new plan. It reduced the number of turbines to 24 from 28 and increased the money paid to Windham to \$1 million from \$715,000 a year for the 25 years. The payments would cut property taxes in half and provide \$150,000 a year for charities, fire departments and educational scholarships.

The company said it would also set aside \$350,000 each year for direct payments to Windham’s 311 registered voters — \$1,125 apiece annually, or \$28,135 over 25 years, which a voter could accept or not.

In Grafton, the company set aside \$215,000 for voter payments. The town’s 504 registered voters would each receive \$427 a year, or \$10,665 over 25 years. (Windham would have 16 turbines and Grafton eight.)

Asked if the company was trying to buy votes, a spokesman, Paul Copleman, said that Iberdrola was merely responding to what residents had said they would need to win approval, and that the developer would abide by the result.

In an email later, he added, “Our current proposal is based on feedback from community members who are frustrated that the tax relief from the project would give a larger break to those with more expensive properties.”

Kathy Scott, 74, a retired bookkeeper and one of the Windham residents who negotiated the package, said residents, not the company, came up with the idea of payments.

She said her group saw them as a way to “level the playing field” with second-

home owners, many of whose homes have high assessments and who would benefit more from the tax cuts. (Although second-home owners pay 60 percent of the town's taxes, they cannot vote here, a sore point for them.)

Opponents were outraged at the payments, perceiving them as an attempt to buy votes, and complained to state officials.

But Michael O. Duane, senior assistant attorney general, said the payments did not violate state law. The proposal “doesn't say that the funds go only to those people who signed a sworn statement that they had voted for it,” he said.

Still, the payment proposal has left a sour taste. As *The Rutland Herald* put it in an editorial on Sunday, “The naked offer of money to individual citizens may be even more corrosive to the civic life of the town than the potential environmental effects of the wind turbines.”

A version of this article appears in print on October 13, 2016, on page A13 of the New York edition with the headline: Needing Assent on Wind Farm, Developer Offers to Pay Voters.