



Lake City and Florence Township: Commitment to a Clean Energy Future

Lola Schoenrich and Elizabeth Weintraub

June 2001

“We set a mousetrap and caught an elephant.” That’s how Sig Anderson characterizes the process that led to the Lake City Wind Project and a multi-community feasibility study of wind energy potential across Minnesota.

Although he is eloquent about renewable energy, Anderson’s real passion is people. He speaks with admiration of the community of committed citizens in Florence Township, Frontenac and Lake City who first came together to fight a proposal to store spent nuclear waste in their community. The group didn’t stop with winning that fight though. They went on to investigate options for renewable energy in their own community and their enthusiasm inspired others to do the same.

In the 1990's, the largest utility in Minnesota, then Northern States Power, now Xcel Energy, knew that it would soon run out of room to store spent nuclear fuel in the storage pool inside their Prairie Island Nuclear Plant. The utility proposed storing spent fuel in above ground casks at the plant (located on an island in the upper Mississippi River, also home to the Prairie Island Indian Tribe.) In 1994, this matter was brought to the Minnesota legislature for a final decision on waste storage at the plant. The 1994 "Prairie Island Bill" addressed waste storage, but also included an historic wind mandate that has resulted in an 800 megawatt commitment to wind energy and proved that Minnesota's native wind resources are both abundant & affordable.

Nuclear Waste in Florence Township?

The road to the Lake City Wind Project began in Florence Township in February 1995, when a provision of that same legislative compromise required a search for an alternate site for waste from Prairie Island. The five candidate sites were all in the township, just outside of Lake City. Two hundred people showed up at a meeting on the issue in the township community center - with only a few hours notice. Kristen Eide-Tollefson, one of those community members says, "that's when I began to think in the collective. Although I have been 'out in front,' I have always had the sense that I was following the lead of the community." Within a month, local residents had formed a citizen action group, they called CURE, Citizen's United for Responsible Energy.

Coming Together

Anderson, Eide-Tollefson, Joan Marshman, and the 15 to 20 other core-founding members moved fast to learn about all aspects of nuclear waste. Eide-Tollefson says, "From the beginning, 'responsible' was the key word in the group's name. It was always more than an



Buffalo Ridge 660kw Turbine

NIMBY fight." CURE's first mission statement reflected a commitment to responsible nuclear waste management.

Still, no one wanted nuclear waste storage in Florence Township. It didn't make environmental sense to CURE members. Nuclear waste will be dangerous to human health and the environment for the next 250,000 years, and the sites being considered were all within the floodplain of the Mississippi River. Nor did it make sense for the local economy. The economies of many of the communities are largely dependent on tourism from the Twin Cities, just some 60 miles to the north. Lake City sits on the shore of scenic Lake Pepin and is the home to numerous bed and breakfasts,



Erecting Test Tower near Lake City, 2001

hotels and motels.

If sited, this proposed nuclear waste storage site, would have been the first storage to be allowed off the property of a nuclear generating plant. Nuclear plants all around the country are running out of storage space for spent nuclear fuel, and CURE members were afraid that their community could easily become the nuclear waste dump for radioactive fuel from all over the country. "We just couldn't allow that!" Eide-Tollefson says.

Winning the Fight

CURE members went to work. They found an attorney, Carol Overland, who dedicated countless hours to the effort. They organized, marching in parades, writing editorials, fundraising, distributing buttons, t-shirts and information at local fairs and festivals. The citizens of Lake City and Florence Township worked closely with their local officials, and community understanding of and opposition to the waste storage grew and grew.

Eide-Tollefson views the community building that took place as critical to winning their fight. She especially points to a 1996 fundraiser that, for the first time, brought together the Frontenac Sportsmen, the Friends of Frontenac Town Hall, and CURE - unlikely allies. She says, "It was a wary but grand success."

CURE members also reached out for help from other activists around the state. George Crocker who led the Prairie Island Coalition Against Nuclear Storage in 1994 was a key source of information & support.

Eide -Tollefson and a number of other citizens from the surrounding communities were appointed to the task force of the state Environmental Quality Board that was charged with making a recommendation on siting for the alternative nuclear waste storage site. After months of public deliberation, the task force recommended keeping the waste on Prairie Island, but included a section of concerns for the Prairie Island Indian Community. The Environmental Quality Board final decision however was delayed by political factors.

Faced with the delay, the utility forwarded its proposal to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Overland, having just submitted the CURE's first state-level suit went to work on the federal front. She learned the federal process, and according to Eide-Tollefson, "She soon had challenged a faulty emergency plan, guided everyone through federal intervention requirements, and submitted a petition for rulemaking."

Faced with the need to hire a Washington-based attorney, CURE once again, turned to the larger community. They went to into the living room of the best-connected Frontenac residents. Eide-Tollefson says, "Within 15 minutes, there was a plan." They were going to brunch with the president of the County Bank and would discuss terms to mortgage the township tax base for the needed money. This caught the ear



Erecting Test Tower – Lake City

of the local state representative. Outraged, he demanded action from NSP, and they withdrew their application.

By 1997, when their fight was won, Eide-Tollefson, Anderson, Marshman, and the others were definitely experts on energy issues.

Thinking Beyond Nuclear Waste

One day while he was lobbying on the issue, an attorney from Northern States Power told Anderson "nuclear waste is your responsibility, because NSP has only generated nuclear waste to satisfy your need for electricity." While the group was astounded by the callousness of this statement, it got people thinking. They realized there was some truth to it, and so began the group's active search for a "CURE" for nuclear waste. In 1997, "Conservation and Conversion" (to renewable energy sources) was added to the CURE mission statement. The goal: to transform energy generation and consumption in Minnesota so nuclear and other polluting or unsafe fuels would no longer be necessary.

The group's first step toward this goal was to join two state level coalitions, the Sustainable Energy for Economic Development coalition and the Clean Water Action Alliance, both working for a cleaner Minnesota energy system. CURE members have been active with these organizations since 1997, and they see it

as a part of working for positive alternatives.

A Local Wind Energy Project

In the course of their research CURE communities learned a great deal about the potential of wind energy. From that research, Anderson's engineering expertise with wind tunnel technologies, and his work with NASA, came the idea for a combined wind/gas power plant in Lake City. Here, it seemed, might be a real alternative to nuclear power. Lake City has a municipal utility, so the City could actually own the generating facilities and the electricity could be used locally.

As chair of CURE, Anderson was invited to the opening celebration of Northern States Power's wind project in Lake Benton in southwestern Minnesota. It was inspiring to hear the farmers and local officials talk about 'farming the wind'. The idea "percolated for a couple years," until 1999, when CURE, with Anderson's help, applied for and received funding from the University of Minnesota, through the Southeast Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, to conduct a feasibility study for the Lake City wind project.

Much harder than getting funding was convincing the Department of Electrical Engineering that wind energy was viable. Initially, the department told Anderson and Dick Broeker, Director of the Southeast Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, that wind energy wasn't practical, that it was "just a toy." Only after they visited the Buffalo Ridge wind farm in Southwestern Minnesota were they convinced. They saw the size and technology of the control center, records proving the turbines were producing at greater capacity than their contract called for, and the potential of wind power to actually stabilize the electric grid. They became believers and left the Buffalo Ridge saying, "There ought to be wind turbines all over Minnesota." And Anderson said, "You're right."

A Community Project with Statewide Impacts

As a result of meetings with Anderson and the University, the four other Sustainable Development Regions joined the effort and expanded the feasibility study from Lake City to an investigation of the potential for community distributed energy projects in five communities around Minnesota; each with different needs and different resources.¹ The Partnerships made the project a centerpiece of their joint mission to support community sustainability initiatives in each of the University Extension's five regions of the state.

The Partnership's commitment and the support of Bruce Wallenberg at the University of Minnesota Center of Electrical Energy resulted in a statewide-distributed generation conference called "Sharing the Load" in March of 2001 in St Cloud. Both Anderson and Eide-Tollefson had a part in organizing the conference. The two and a half-day conference, planned on a seven-week timeline with four weeks of public notice, drew over 300 people from communities, local utilities, governments & businesses. It's success was, in large part, due to the broad range of sponsorship and topics that explored environmental and consumer issues, the global picture of distributed generation in the age of electric restructuring, and the long-term implications of conversion to renewable energy sources.

The impacts of the Lake City Wind Project have far exceeded anyone's expectations. Starting with one small city, and one small, but determined citizen group, CURE's initiative and Anderson's work has impacted the entire state.

A Long Range Vision and Commitment to the Future

Anderson's and other CURE members' long-range vision goes beyond the wind project.

With natural gas as a "bridge fuel," they envision the widespread use of fuel cells, utilizing wind driven manufacture of hydrogen from water, making wind a storable energy source and creating fuel out of "the most abundant element in the universe." Wind is not subject to the price fluctuations of conventional fuel sources and has none of the environmental pitfalls of coal, nuclear, and large hydro-power, Anderson says.

Anderson emphasizes the need for regular Minnesotans to advocate for and be willing to invest time, energy and money in our native renewable sources of power. We need to educate our legislators on how renewables fit into an innovative energy plan for the state that can create greater reliability, security and other economic advantages, particularly for rural communities. Anderson and CURE continue to work with the state's coalitions of public interest energy groups to see that renewables and distributed generation systems, tied into local electric grids throughout the state, are a key part of Minnesota's energy future.

Bridge-Building Was Key

Eide-Tollefson emphasizes the bridge building within the area as being among the keys to the group's success. She says the community, "braved initial storms of rage, despair and mistrust." But the community came together. Every time they reached out to new people, both inside and outside the community, the new ideas and new energy contributed made something else possible.

Anderson spoke with pride of the dedication of the Prairie Island Coalition, Minnesota Project, Minnesotans for An Energy Efficient Economy and others, all the state-wide groups that have helped. He talked about teamwork and what can be accomplished by collaborative effort. He emphasized the profound impact a small number of dedicated citizens can have on the

¹ For more information contact Dick Broeker at the Southeast Regional Sustainable Partnership. Dick Broeker, Executive Director, Experiment in Rural Cooperation, University of Minnesota, 651 345 4336, dbroeker@rconnect.com

direction of an entire state. "I came fairly late to this opportunity to work with legislators and state agencies. What amazes me is how much influence a private citizen can have. If you're persistent", he said, "you can make an important contribution and have a long-term effect on the state. The world needs more people who have that commitment and perseverance". CURE and its members have shown without a doubt that they fit that description.

For More Information:

- Dick Broeker Executive Director, Experiment in Rural Cooperation, University of Minnesota, RR 3, Box 1861, Lake City, MN 55041, Phone: 651 345 4336, Fax: 651 345 7551, Email: dbroeker@rconnect.com
- Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, www.regionalpartnerships.umn.edu
- Kristen Eide-Tollefson, at bookhous@pro-ns.net
- Sig Anderson, at mariner@eldinc.com