

A greener Wilton: Future efforts may pale due to budget cuts

Written by Justin Reynolds

Sunday, 21 February 2010 15:00

The future of Wilton's energy is looking brighter - and greener - thanks in part to the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund (CCEF) and the Connecticut Energy Efficiency Fund (CEEFF), according to members of the town's energy commission. But maybe not for long.

Earlier this month, Gov. M. Jodi Reil - "required to find alternate sources of funding" in attempt to address the state's budget deficit, according to Dona Pratt, commission chair - proposed using the CCEF and CEEFF monies to address Hartford's problems.

At its meeting on Feb. 4, the commission voted to request that Wilton's representatives - Senator Toni Boucher and Reps. Peggy Reeves and John Hetherington - "vigorously oppose" such a move, Ms. Pratt said.

"The funds are the foundation for all clean energy and energy efficiency programs in the state," Ms. Pratt told The Bulletin. "Their funding comes from the system benefits charge on each electric bill, a charge created specifically to support clean energy and energy efficiency. The proposed plan would divert monies for at least 10 years for a revenue stream to fund borrowing."

Stripping the CCEF and CEEFF monies would be detrimental to the state and to Wilton, said Bruce Hampson, energy commission member. Without the funds being used for their intended purposes, electrical rates would increase.

The energy commission recently determined that over the past three years, the town has consumed 12% less energy in its municipal and school buildings, a savings of nearly \$145,000.

Mr. Hampson said "a significant part of that improvement was as a result of monies from the CEEFF through Connecticut Light and Power." In the recent high school renovation project, for example, energy efficiency measures like the installation of occupancy sensors, which shut off lights when no one is in a room, were made possible through an \$86,000 grant from Connecticut Light and Power, through the funds.

Wilton High School is also slated to receive a 5 kW solar array - from CCEF funds - which is scheduled to be installed next month, Mr. Hampson said. Coupled with a private donation of an additional 15 kW, also due in part to CCEF funds, Wilton High School will generate enough energy to power four houses, he said.

"If the governor does use those funds somewhere else, it's going to have a significant impact on our ability to decrease energy consumption," Mr. Hampson said. "We think the proposal is very unfortunate. To take energy efficiency and clean energy funds to balance the budget really penalizes some really, really good work that all the towns in Connecticut have been doing."

Ms. Pratt said it's "important for people to let their representatives know the money that comes from those funds is being put to good uses. The towns are finding ways to save energy, and in a lot of cases, save money. Those funds are really an investment."

"It's a win-win situation to continue funding those funds fully," Ms. Pratt said.

"Connecticut is one of the highest cost energy states in the country," she said, adding the CEEFF and CCEF "provide indispensable assistance that allows municipal, commercial and residential customers to lower their energy bills and source clean energy."

Ms. Pratt said Wiltonians have received \$287,427 in CEEFF funds from Connecticut Light and Power since 2008.

Officials respond

The Bulletin asked state Senator Toni Boucher (R-26), state Rep. Peggy Reeves (D-143), and state Rep. John Hetherington (R-125) about their thoughts on the governor's proposal.

"I am strongly opposed to the governor's proposal to raid the state's consumer-supported energy funds," Ms. Reeves wrote in an e-mail to The Bulletin. "It doesn't make any sense to raid these programs at a point where we are trying to grow green jobs in Connecticut."

Ms. Boucher said the governor is forced to deal with a "very difficult budget deficit" which is nearly double that of the next worst state. She said, per capita, the deficit in California is \$922 per person and in Connecticut it is \$1,700 per person.

"At this point, the governor can only propose an option," Ms. Boucher said. "Only the legislature can decide. They really have control of the budget. I would like to see some action. I put in some proposals to cut costs" which wouldn't include these funds.

Mr. Hetherington said that while the energy funds are great for Wilton and the state, Hartford is facing serious budget problems and money needs to come from somewhere.

"The fact of the matter is these sweeps are going on all over the place," Mr. Hetherington said. "They're taking money out of the tobacco funds and other funds because of the desperate need the state has for money. I would hate to see the clean energy funds swept, but I'd be less than honest if I said it wasn't going to happen."

Energy tidbits

In other areas concerning energy, Wilton was recently named a Clean Energy Community, Mr. Hampson said.

"It's part of a program that is administered, run and advocated by the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund," he explained. "They award a designation and title to a community that makes a commitment to source 20% of their municipal energy from renewable sources by 2010. That's what we've done."

Mr. Hampson said the energy purchased is roughly 1.3 cents/kW hour more expensive than non-renewable energy.

Wilton also recently received a \$76,000 grant, part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act earmarked specifically for energy-related investments. Mr. Hampson said First Selectman William Brennan was instrumental in helping Wilton secure the grant.

Of that money, Mr. Hampson said, about \$20,000 will be used to "change out some outdoor lighting either at a school campus or municipal campus from its present lighting to LED lamps, which will save approximately 70% of the energy that those lamps are using now." Some \$25,000 will be used to retain the services of an energy consultant, who will prepare an energy management plan for the town moving forward. The final \$30,000 is "earmarked for energy upgrades in the municipal campus buildings."

Mr. Hampson said the money spent will result in "energy savings and decrease the emissions of carbon dioxide."

Because of Wilton's commitment to clean energy moving forward, Mr. Hampson said, the town was one of five towns asked to serve on the governor's Task Force for Climate Change.

"She wants to hear from those communities which have taken a leadership position on clean energy and energy savings," Mr. Hampson said, adding the task force will meet on March 13, as Gov. Rell wants to see which energy-saving programs the communities think would be most beneficial for the state to adopt.

Ms. Pratt said the energy commission is planning a Wilton Go Green Festival,

scheduled to take place on May 2.

"We are using money from the clean energy fund to fund part of the festival," Ms. Pratt said of a \$4,000 grant from the CCEF. The festival is "really focused on educating people about all the little things you can do every day to save energy and save money. If everybody starts to change their behavior in small ways, and they tell their friends as well, we can really get the word out with a relatively small amount of money."

Ms. Pratt said the festival will feature exhibitions, speakers and workshops.

"We wouldn't be able to do this without the funding from the Connecticut Energy Efficiency Fund," she said.

Information: wiltongogreenfestival.com.

Scott A Hinson
President/CEO
New England Energy Management, Inc
5 Shelter Rock Rd
Danbury, CT 06810
p (203) 792-1900 Ext 11
f (203) 792-1906
c (203) 948-0852
www.NewEnglandEnergy.com