

The story of a windmill

By Dale Landrith Sr. | Jun 29, 2017

A much-celebrated windmill was erected at the Camden Hills Regional High School in 2012. The project was student-initiated, which is good. The project began with a focus on the potential benefits of wind energy. The project soon became consumed with “green” is good, regardless of the cost or the benefit.

The windmill stands 155 feet tall. The projected lifespan of the windmill is 20 to 25 years. It was projected to produce between \$12,000 and \$28,000 of electricity per year, according to the [blog](#) of the student group, Windplanners, at a cost of \$510,000, to construct and erect, as reported in a [Bangor Daily News](#) story by Heather Steeves in December 2010. Using the best of scenarios, it would take 18 years to pay back the cost of the generator, while at the same time completely disregarding the cost of money. In addition, after the 18-year payback, there would be only two to seven years of useful life. No business in its right mind would ever make such a capital expenditure based upon that kind of payback and life expectancy. However, since the funds were raised by donations, the project was deemed justified.

Objections to the project were ignored. At one School Board meeting, a Rockport resident challenged the projections of wind speed and thus savings. His objections were ignored because of supposedly newer technology, according to a story on [Villagesoup](#) by Shlomit Auciello, also in December 2010. Another major objection was that mechanical things break and need to be fixed. Regardless of lifespan, there are always breakdowns and maintenance. Somewhere in the various projections, there was mention of setting aside \$3,500 per year for maintenance. However, that has not surfaced in any of the current numbers.

Why does all this matter now, five years later? In May, it was observed that the windmill at CHRHS was not operating. Upon asking some questions, it was learned that the windmill was not functioning. The windmill needed major repairs. The warranty on the windmill expired March 23. The windmill stopped functioning April 13. Since the facility director had documented the problems beginning in January, the warranty was honored

for replacement parts, which consisted of a complete new generator for the windmill. Without the warranty, the cost to the district would have been \$90,000. That is the good news. The bad news is that the estimated cost to the school district for labor and crane to replace the generator is \$30,000. It has cost the taxpayers \$30,000 for five years of use of the generator. What about the future? Any further repairs will potentially cost the Five Town CSD huge sums of money. The \$30,000 expense was included in the budget just recently approved by the voters.

How about all of the money that this generator was going to save by producing electricity? It seems that the folks who were raising concerns about the windmill were correct. It is not producing anywhere near the quantity of electricity that was promised. In five years the windmill has produced \$40,000 of electricity, or \$8,000 per year. This is far short of the \$12,000 to \$28,000 annually that was anticipated. After deducting the \$30,000 for the repair cost, this windmill has “saved” taxpayers \$2,000 per year, for a total of \$10,000. The payback from electricity savings will now take more than 50 years, or twice the best-case lifespan of the generator. This would bring into doubt the wisdom of even fixing the windmill from a cost analysis. If there is any kind of serious breakdown in the next five years, the “savings” from the windmill will not even have covered the cost of tearing it down and throwing it away.

Windmills are mechanical devices. Mechanical devices break. Windmills depend on accurate wind studies. If a wind study proves incorrect, then we have a \$500,000 project that does not produce what was promised. What is the result? A June 2016 [Portland Press Herald](#) article had the headline, “Once a proud symbol of city, Saco wind turbine bound for scrap heap”.

There should not be any further taxpayer funds allotted to the CHRHS windmill.