



NEWS RELEASE

Ted Arnott, MPP
Wellington - Halton Hills

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Wilkinson must clarify remarks on wind farms, Arnott insists

(Queen's Park) – Municipalities may, or may not, have the power to reject new wind farms in Wellington County and across Ontario.

"We need to know what powers communities actually have," said Wellington-Halton Hills MPP Ted Arnott.

Mr. Arnott is asking John Wilkinson, Minister of the Environment and MPP for Perth-Wellington, to clarify his seemingly contradictory remarks on the issue.

In an exchange this week in the Ontario Legislature, Mr. Wilkinson refused to repeat his earlier assurances, published May 21st in two community newspapers, that if municipalities did not agree to wind applications, those applications would not be approved.

"Clearly, the minister was saying something different five months ago than he's saying today in this House," Mr. Arnott told the Legislature. "The minister led his constituents to believe that municipal councils can stop the wind farms from being built."

Wind farm proponents must submit a complete application, responded Mr. Wilkinson. "Under the law, one of the requirements is that the municipality has to be consulted." But that wasn't good enough for Mr. Arnott, who demanded a "late show"—a legislative mechanism giving MPPs opportunity to revisit their earlier question in a brief debate.

Mr. Wilkinson did not attend the evening debate, instead sending his parliamentary assistant, MPP Helena Jaczek.

"The minister now appears to be suggesting that as long as that municipality is consulted, the application would still be complete," Mr. Arnott observed during that debate.

"So which is it: what the minister said in May or what the minister is saying today?"

Consulting municipalities is obviously important, Mr. Arnott later explained, but consultation doesn't necessarily give them the power to stop a wind farm that they may not want.

"That's why we need John Wilkinson to be clear—will his government respect the will of the people, or will they be overlooked?"

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Attached: Ontario Hansard (October 4 and 5, 2010) and news article

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WIND TURBINES

Mr. Ted Arnott: My question is for the Minister of the Environment. About five months ago, the minister attended a local council meeting in Wellington county to discuss the Green Energy Act, including the approvals process for wind farm proposals. There, according to two published reports in two local community papers—the Wellington Advertiser and the Drayton Community News, in their May 21 editions—he stated that if municipalities refused to sign off on the wind applications, the applications would not be approved.

Now that he's the Minister of the Environment, the head of the ministry which reviews the wind farm applications, is he prepared to repeat the same statement in the House this morning?

Hon. John Wilkinson: We are in the process, of course, of eliminating dirty coal-fired generation in the province of Ontario—the first in North America. We are making investments in green renewable energy across this province and leading North America in that regard.

For a project in regard to wind development to be approved by the Ministry of the Environment, it needs to have received the approval for a renewable energy approval. That is new in the province of Ontario and was contained in the Green Energy and Green Economy Act that we passed in this House. One of the requirements is that a proponent must submit a complete application, and that includes a review and a consultation with the municipality, a schedule that is attached to that application. We will, of course, look at any approval which is complete. We will not look at-

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary?

Mr. Ted Arnott: Clearly, the minister was saying something different five months ago than he's saying today in this House.

The truth is, this government's Green Energy Act has stripped municipal councils of their local decision-making authority, pitted neighbour against neighbour in rural Ontario, and created legitimate questions about the long-term cost of electricity even as hydro bills are skyrocketing today. Here we have a minister of the crown, at a public meeting in his riding, stating that municipalities have a de facto veto over wind farm applications.

The minister led his constituents to believe that municipal councils can stop the wind farms from being built. Will he now admit and acknowledge that he was wrong to do so?

Hon. John Wilkinson: I'll try to answer the question out of respect for my colleague; we share Wellington county.

I'll say yet again: For a wind turbine project to be approved in the province of Ontario by the Ministry of the Environment, the proponent must submit a complete application. That is the law. Under the law, one of the requirements is that the municipality has to be consulted. There also have to be public consultations. As well, in the consultations, it is important that the municipality has to complete a schedule that says that all of the issues in regard to the municipality have been addressed.

I'll say yet again: There will not be an approval of a renewable energy approval in this province of Ontario unless an application is complete. The requirements in regard to the municipalities are very clear, and those standards must be met in the province of Ontario.

ADJOURNMENT DEBATE

WIND TURBINES

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Julia Munro): Pursuant to standing order 38(a), the member for Wellington–Halton Hills has given notice of his dissatisfaction with the answer to his question given by the Minister of the Environment. This matter will be debated. Pursuant to standing order 38, the question that this House do now adjourn is deemed to have been made.

The member has up to five minute to debate the matter, and the parliamentary assistant may reply for up to five minutes.

Mr. Ted Arnott: Yesterday I asked the Minister of the Environment a simple question. I asked only that he repeat in this House a statement he had already made some five months ago. This minister, while he was still the Minister of Revenue and endeavouring to sell the people of Ontario on the virtues of the HST, was evidently speaking to some of his constituents at a meeting in Mapleton township. Two community newspapers reported the minister's remarks: the Wellington Advertiser and the Drayton Community News in their May 21 editions. I have copies of both of these articles in my hands. They're easily accessible to anyone. The minister appeared to promise his constituents that if municipalities refused to sign off on the wind farm applications, the Ministry of the Environment would not approve those applications. I'll read from the article verbatim:

“One resident in the gallery asked point blank if there is anything the township could do to stop wind farms if the proponents have otherwise met all the government's criteria.

“Wilkinson replied companies must obtain the signature of the township for the application to be complete.

“‘If the application is not complete, the project will not proceed,’ he said.”

Let's imagine the minister at this meeting. He is taking questions, and the mood of the room is decidedly heated. It was, of course, his government that imposed the Green Energy Act, and no doubt he voted for it. Under fire, his instinct is to try to shift the blame for the wind farms to the local municipal government, to imply that the local municipal government has a de facto veto over the project application, that they can stop it dead in its tracks simply by refusing to sign. I wonder what the municipal councillors present in that room were saying under their breath or through gritted teeth.

Anyone reading those articles in the Wellington Advertiser and the Drayton Community News would conclude that the minister was saying that municipalities had the power to stop wind farms. Now he's the Minister of the Environment. It is his ministry that approves the wind farm applications.

In his initial response to me on Monday, he failed—indeed, he was unwilling—to categorically repeat his response in question period, as I'd requested. Instead, he told this House that a wind farm “proponent must submit a complete application, and that includes a review and a consultation with the municipality.”

To any reasonable person, that is very different from saying that municipalities could stop a wind farm application simply by refusing to sign it. Whereas the minister once suggested that municipalities have an effective veto over new wind farm proposals, he is today speaking about proof of consultation.

The minister failed to address the obvious: What constitutes consultation as required for an application to be complete? Is it consultation or is it just information? And what if a democratically elected municipal council decides it doesn't want a wind farm in its community? The minister now appears to be suggesting

that as long as that municipality is consulted, the application would still be complete. So which is it: what the minister said in May or what the minister is saying today?

Whatever the case, he validates my initial response as long ago as February 2009 during second reading debate. That's when I responded to the McGuinty government's so-called Green Energy Act, saying it should be more appropriately called the Power Grab Act. Communities know this.

Families are concerned about the health effects, particularly the long-term health effects, of living near wind farms. Perhaps in response to those concerns, the government asked the chief medical officer of health to report existing research on the issue. Yet the government itself has tacitly acknowledged that that report is insufficient because the Premier has, in addition to the chief medical officer's report, appointed a research chair to study health effects. In fact, he's spending public money, \$300,000 a year for five years, to support this second study by an internationally recognized scientist in the field of renewable energy.

The Minister of the Environment should know this because his ministry is providing the funding. And if the Premier genuinely believes that this study is necessary, surely he must therefore recognize the legitimacy of the health concerns.

So I want to return to my question about municipal consultation. Very simply, can a municipality reject a wind farm proposal or does this government plan to foist it upon them against their will? Do they have a veto, as the minister once suggested, or do they not have a veto? It's a simple question, and the people in my riding and across Ontario are demanding answers.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Julia Munro): The parliamentary assistant.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: It really is a pleasure to rise today to expand a little bit on the provisions of the Green Energy Act for the edification of our colleague from Wellington–Halton Hills.

First of all, I'd like to say that the Green Energy Act is a great step forward for the people of Ontario. It means we can phase out dirty coal and promote cleaner, renewable energy like solar and wind in Ontario.

I think Gordon Miller, the Environmental Commissioner for Ontario, said it best, and I quote, "The ECO strongly supports both the vision and goals underpinning the" Green Energy Act "and views it as a bold and sincere attempt to recast energy policy in a positive direction."

As a physician, I know that coal kills people. I'd like to remind the member for Wellington–Halton Hills that when his party was in government, emissions from coal increased 124% during their time in office. And of course we are eliminating it.

I'm very pleased that health professionals are also taking this view. Hilary de Veber from the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment is quoted in the Toronto Star, September 23, 2010: "We need to close the coal plants now and make more room on the grid for healthier renewable energy sources, like wind and solar."

Our renewable energy approval keeps people's health top of mind while encouraging the development renewable energy. All wind project applicants are required to meet the same standards across the province, including a minimum noise setback of 550 metres for wind turbines.

This distance was set based on a precautionary principle because Dr. Arlene King, Ontario's chief medical officer of health, has stated, "There are no direct links between wind turbines and adverse health impacts."

Our new renewable energy approval means we have a coordinated and improved approvals process, and certainty with respect to provincial standards. No longer will municipalities have to deal with the issue of setbacks themselves, which did in fact start to create a patchwork of setbacks across the province. The renewable energy approval is transparent and offers public review.

Specifically, if an applicant of a renewable energy project has a proposal, they must consult with local municipalities prior to applying for a renewable energy approval—which I think I'll now shorten to REA. Municipal consultation is mandatory for all projects requiring an REA, except for very small wind projects. Consultation with the municipality in which the facility would be located is required to take place at least 90 days before submitting an REA application.

The Ministry of the Environment provides applicants with a form that outlines what needs to be addressed with municipal officials. This must be submitted to the ministry as part of the application. The form requests municipal feedback on matters related to municipal services and infrastructure, such as the proposed road access; the rehabilitation of areas disturbed and/or municipal infrastructure damaged during construction; and emergency management procedures and safety protocols related to the ongoing management of the facility.

If the applicant is not able to provide all of the required information, the complete submission must explain why. In addition, the applicant must describe and document efforts to address any issues raised during municipal consultation.

I'll now quote a particular mayor who is clearly extremely enthusiastic about the Green Energy Act. Lynn Acre, mayor of Bayham—the municipality of Bayham is home to Erie Shores Wind Farm—said, “Our municipality has benefited so much from wind energy that it is now a part of our identity.”

In the remaining few short seconds I have, I'd also like to point out that one of the great benefits of the Green Energy Act is of course the creation of jobs. Earlier today, one of our caucus members read out a list of the jobs related specifically to solar and wind projects in this province. It was absolutely astounding, the number of jobs we're creating. This act is good for the health of Ontarians and for our economy.