



## Suburban schools look to 'farms' as a way to generate, save energy

By Jameel Naqvi | Daily Herald Staff

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Last year, two suburban school districts hit upon the same idea to cut energy costs and reduce the districts' reliance on fossil fuels.

The districts, Keeneyville Elementary District 20 in Hanover Park and Community Unit District 300 in Carpentersville, started to explore wind turbines that can harness wind power and convert it into electricity.

But both districts soon found their promising idea stymied by restrictive state and local laws.

The districts then hit upon another solution: wind farms, clusters of turbines that can generate enough electricity to power several buildings, or even multiple local governments.

But most suburban districts don't have enough land to support large wind turbines and accommodate the sometimes burdensome requirements imposed by municipalities.

"I can't put a windmill on every school," said David Ulm, District 300's energy management coordinator. "Half of the elementary schools are in the middle of neighborhoods."

Indeed, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg just this week suggested at a clean energy summit in Las Vegas that windmills could top bridges and buildings around his city - and was quickly laughed at. However, he did respond that wind farms near the windy Atlantic coastline would be a good option.

In Central and Southern Illinois, school officials say, the breezy plains provide both enough land and enough wind to make wind farms downstate feasible.

The problem, school officials and lawmakers say, is that current laws don't allow local governments in Illinois to generate electricity off-site and sell it back to a utility company at a reasonable price.

An Illinois House bill could potentially fix these issues and provide the legal framework for school districts and municipalities throughout the suburbs to start benefiting from wind power produced on a large scale.

The bill, HB6660, would enshrine the principle of "net aggregate metering" in Illinois law.

Currently, a school district can put up a wind turbine at a school and get the amount of electricity it produces deducted from the electric bill for that school.

But if a school wanted to produce a lot more electricity - say, using an off-site wind farm - current law doesn't require electric utilities to give districts a one-to-one credit.

Under net aggregate metering, a district would pump electricity into the grid downstate, and ComEd would subtract all the electricity the district generates from the district's electric bill.

"This is an extremely innovative way to - control the costs for the school and promote renewable energy in the state," said state Rep. Fred Crespo of Streamwood, who introduced the bill.

Suburban school districts and municipalities agree. About 50 have signed onto a resolution supporting Crespo's bill, according to school officials.

But legislators and school officials who support the bill concede it won't be easy to get Crespo's bill on the governor's desk.

The chief obstacle, they say, is ComEd and other electric utilities. ComEd, which serves Northern Illinois, opposes the bill, and supporters of Crespo's bill say they expect the utility giant's lobbying arm to be fully flexed against HB6660.

"They will put the pressure on their legislators with campaign contributions," said Gary Ofisher, director of operations in District 20. "They will mount a campaign against us like no tomorrow."

ComEd says the bill, as proposed, is unfair.

"ComEd is opposed to the bill, and that opposition is based on the fact that it would allow some customers free access to the transmission and distribution system," ComEd spokesman Luis Diaz-Perez said.

It's not clear if this is the case. The relevant section of HB6660 doesn't explicitly address transmission costs, but it does allow utilities to execute contracts that set the "prices, terms and conditions" of electricity access.

State Sen. Mike Noland of Elgin, who plans to introduce a companion bill in the Senate, said, "ComEd would still be able to charge them for maintenance."

But Crespo acknowledged ComEd's concerns.

"I understand their concern about the cost of transmission," Crespo said. "I'm willing to amend the bill if we need to address that issue."

A ComEd spokesman also said the utility is willing to meet with Crespo to discuss its issues with the bill.

But according to Crespo, that discussion has already taken place - to no avail.

"We tried with ComEd and it didn't work out, so we're going to go this route," Crespo said.

The first-term representative, who's up for re-election in the fall, said he's bracing for a fight.

"I'm going to do whatever I can to make sure this gets out of the House," Crespo said. "Now, we just put our boxing gloves on and go at it."

Crespo will have some help.

Noland could hardly mask his enthusiasm for wind-generated electricity as he made lofty predictions about the future of the energy source.

"Not only are you going to save on energy costs - governments should be allowed to reduce enough electricity - to cover all the costs of government, administrative costs as well," Noland said.

It's not clear if the bill in its current form would allow governments to use electricity credits to offset their entire operational cost or if they would only be able to reduce their electricity bills.

Crespo said the intent of the bill was to reduce governments' energy costs - not to turn them into "quasi-energy producers."

Like his House colleague, Noland was unfazed by the prospects of a fight with ComEd.

"This is an economic imperative," said Noland, a first-term senator. "When you have the economics of this behind you, victory is all but inevitable."

Whether or not that is the case, suburban school districts are watching closely to see what happens with HB6660.

If it passes, District 300, which stretches from Hampshire to Hoffman Estates, could potentially save as much as \$2.75 million in electricity costs each year.

"We don't foresee any end to the wind," District 300's Ulm said. "Once the darn thing is paid for, we're looking at a reduction to our operating cost."

But before schools can reduce their operating costs, they have to pay for the wind turbines, which each cost about \$5 million.

It would cost District 300 at least \$30 million to put up the estimated six turbines it would need to power all of its schools - enough money to build three new elementary schools.

Districts could finance part of the cost and installation of turbines with Clean Renewable Energy Bonds, essentially interest-free loans from the federal government.

It would take District 300 at least 10 years to pay back the installation cost with energy savings, but the turbines would last another 20 years.

"This doesn't affect the taxpayers," Ofisher said. "It's a positive way for school districts to reduce their operating expenses so less money goes to electricity and more money goes to education."