

Vermont's Energy Future Polled



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For the past year, the state undertook a project to find out exactly what Vermonters think about possible sources of electric power in the future. With contracts for Hydro Quebec and Vermont Yankee nuclear due to expire in a few years, where should Vermont get its power after that?

On a weekend last November, 200 Vermonters were selected at random. They met for two days at the University of Vermont to discuss and learn about electric energy options. They were asked at the conclusion about what they think should be the state's future energy policy.



UVM Senior Research Analyst Richard Watts said, "There's this constraint in Vermont between taking what people clearly care about and what actually emerges as the public policy outcome."

Watts helped put together the UVM event. The process, known as deliberative polling, looked at energy options, including small renewables like wind and solar, as well as large sources like Hydro Quebec and Vermont Yankee nuclear.



Nuclear has been controversial for decades, drawing periodic protests. The polling found a nearly fifty-fifty split in support versus non-support. Dottie Schnure of Green Mountain Power Corporation says while nuclear remains a divisive issue, the idea of small renewables is popular. "Our polls that we have done show that people are interested in more renewable and small generation," Schnure said. "People say they're interested in wind. It's been difficult to locate wind plants."

The poll showed heavy support for wind -- even if a project were visible from a person's home. The people who were polled indicated that they would be willing to spend somewhat more for renewables even though wind power in particular is not as reliable -- when the wind stops blowing.

But Richard Watts says the preference for wind is a mandate that should not be ignored. "It's clear that the state needs to do more to support large wind facilities in Vermont," he said. "That's one of the clear messages I think that should be taken from that weekend of asking Vermonters what they think."

The question is, will future energy policy actually follow the results of the polling. That is, will electric utilities move away from large out-of-state sources and rely more on small, in-state, renewable sources? In fact, should they? It's a question that still awaits an answer.

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