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UNH Student Research Project Leads To New Wind Energy Law
DURHAM, N.H. - An undergraduate research project by a group of University of New Hampshire students has led to a new state law that supports the use of residential wind energy.

HB 310 was signed into law by Gov. John Lynch Friday, July 11, 2008. A ceremonial bill signing is set for 10:00 a.m. Friday, July 25, 2008, in the Executive Council chambers with the governor, the bill's sponsor and the professor who worked with the students on their project.

"This is a real feather in the cap of the university to have programs that challenge students to go out and make a change in their community and state. That actually happened in this case, and it wasn't an easy process. The university should be very proud that it supported this activity," said Rep. William Chase (D), who sponsored the wind energy legislation and shepherded it through the legislative process.

Residential wind energy systems consist of a tower with a windmill that generates electricity for the residence. Surplus energy goes back into the electrical grid, and the owners of the wind energy system receive a credit for it. The new law provides guidelines for cities and towns regarding what to do when someone wants to erect a residential wind energy system. It addresses height issues, noise, setbacks, and aesthetics, and outlines a process for input from neighbors affected by such systems.

The legislative effort began when Laura Carpenter and her research team needed a project for their International Environmental Politics class in fall 2006. The group decided to research local ordinances regulating residential wind systems, in part, because Carpenter's family had been trying to erect a wind energy system in Maine and had run into obstacles with local ordinances.

According to Carpenter and Chase, while interest in alternative residential energy systems is growing, most communities have not thought about wind energy so they have no ordinances or zoning rules that specifically address small residential wind energy units. Instead many communities rely on existing generic structural ordinances that are difficult to apply to alternative energy systems. In Carpenter's case, her family wanted to erect a 100-foot wind turbine tower, but the town limited it to 35 feet because generic building codes prohibited structures over 35 feet for fire safety reasons.
"The students concluded that state and local laws discouraged and often outright prohibited residential wind turbines. Only a change in state law would make residential wind turbines more viable. The students contacted New Hampshire state legislators and legislative committees, researched comparable legislation around the country, and as the process went forward, helped draft the bill," said Jeannie Sowers, assistant professor of political science at UNH who teaches International Environmental Politics.

After drafting wind energy system legislation, the students went looking for a sponsor - someone, according to Carpenter, who would "listen to local college kids and stick their neck out and sponsor this legislation."

They found their "neck" in Chase, who serves on the NH House Science, Technology and Energy Committee.

"When I saw the email from Laura Carpenter wanting to look at small wind energy systems, it appealed to me because we need to encourage individuals to think about alternative forms of energy," Chase said. "Cynics would say that individuals creating energy is really just a drop in the bucket and won't amount to much, but we are only going to solve our dependence on fossils fuel with small projects like solar, wind and geothermal systems."

The legislation took a year-and-a-half circuitous route to becoming law, in part because of concerns from the NH Municipal Association about local control, according to Chase. But after a year and a half of bouncing from committee to committee, testimony from Carpenter and others, several revisions, and nearly dying in committee, the bill was passed by state legislators and signed into law by Lynch.

"We need to celebrate what students can do with encouragement. Here is a student who took the bull by the horns and actually created change. The UNH research process really sparked this individual, and the university should be very proud. I was just an instrument in this process," Chase said.

Carpenter graduated from UNH in 2007 with a dual major in political science and international affairs. She now works as an assistant at a government affairs firm in Washington, D.C., that supports environmental and climate change legislation.

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