

Green-energy hub proposed

By Matt Sheley
Daily News staff

The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission is looking to become a one-stop shop for all things renewable and having to do with alternative energy.

Officials said the commission's goal is to become the key information source on "green" energy to help area residents, businesses and municipalities to save money and the environment. Organizers want to get the program up and running as soon as possible should there be interest and appropriate funding.

Sarah Cookson, the planning commission's energy coordinator, said the organization is not getting into the business of building solar panels or wind turbines. It hopes to provide per-

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SARAH COOKSON

energy coordinator,
Aquidneck Island Planning Commission

tinent information for anyone looking for more details.

"There's no guarantee we're going to be able to do this and it's only in the conceptual phase, but it just makes sense," Cookson said. "There's more and more interest out there about alternative energy, and energy efficiency is something that everyone is

talking about to help keep their energy bills down."

Since the success of the wind turbine at Portsmouth Abbey School in Portsmouth, Aquidneck Island has found itself as the epicenter of alternative energy in Rhode Island. Each of the three island communities has dealt with a variety of projects, with the town of Portsmouth erecting a municipal wind turbine on the grounds of Portsmouth High School. The construction was chronicled on National Geographic TV.

Naval Station Newport's plan to build several wind turbines along the island's west shoreline has attracted the most attention locally. While Navy officials have said the proposal is a long way from becoming reality, the goal is to diminish energy costs, which total about \$10 million annu-

ally, at the military base.

Formed in 1985, the planning commission has been involved in a number of high-profile efforts in recent years, including the West Side Master Plan and the first comprehensive study of the local traffic system.

Cookson said she was struck by the idea during a recent breakfast sponsored by the Newport County Chamber of Commerce that the planning commission should get more involved in the alternative energy field. According to paperwork recently submitted to the Middletown Town Council, the commission would become the countywide "energy clearinghouse" for renewable and efficient energy. The commission would become an "expert" on renewable energy oppor-

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tunities as well as the application processes for such undertakings.

The clearinghouse would provide answers to questions, examine possible savings and help interested groups to install energy-saving or renewable-energy operations. The group would work with existing energy specialists such as National Grid, the state Office of Energy Resources, the University of Rhode Island Energy Center and others to leverage its reach.

Cookson said it is not anticipated the clearinghouse would partner with any private businesses in the field, but rather act as an independent agency in keeping with its nonprofit status. The organization's office is located on Broadway in Newport.

"A lot of times, people or businesses are interested in (green energy), but they're not sure where to turn," she said. "We think there's a role we can fill to help provide information in a timely manner all in one place."

"It's an exciting idea, where we could be a hub of renewable energy and alternative energy," added Tina Dolen, the planning commission's executive director. "We're not going to be permitting or constructing anything, but we'd be involved in just about every other segment of energy in Newport and Bristol counties."

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