

**OPINION > LETTERS**

## **The Chops: The wrong location for a tidal energy project**

Print Page

**By Ed Friedman**

Published:

Friday, June 12, 2009 2:07 PM EDT

As a parting corporate shot last week, Oceana Energy cited, twice, "local hostility" as the reason it would not pursue a tidal energy project at The Chops in Merrymeeting Bay.

The public has been inundated with this disingenuous rhetoric from big corporate biz: too much regulation or "local hostility" made them leave, not their own greed or poor management. The corporate mantra, unfortunately, is effective as it is old and worn out.

The truth of the Oceana matter lies in its own printed decision: "(Oceana) has conducted a review of the environmental sensitivity of the Kennebec River area site ... and determined that insufficient development potential exists for pursuit of either a full development or pilot project there."

Further, Oceana did not deliver its promise to work with state, federal and local agencies as well as environmental groups as it developed the tidal energy project at The Chops.

Flagrantly misleading in its required six-month filing, Oceana stated: "METidal and its environmental permitting consultants have had continuing discussions about this project with various stakeholders, including resource agencies, environmental advocacy groups, and prospective project partners ...

"METidal will continue to engage regulatory agencies, state and federal resource agencies, tribal entities, environmental groups, academic institutions and the public to identify and understand possibilities for resolution of potential multi-use conflicts, as well as environmental issues and concerns..."

There is little or no evidence that METidal did anything of the kind. They certainly did not talk to any relevant environmental groups (Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, Chewonki, Conservation Law Foundation) in the Merrymeeting Bay area.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay is a local environmental organization. Our mission: To preserve, protect, and improve the unique ecosystems of Merrymeeting Bay. To that end we also work statewide on issues ranging from appropriate siting for alternative energy, land conservation, fish restoration through improved fish passage at dams, toxic use reduction, etc., as well as education and advocacy to achieve our long-term vision that includes balance with environmental and economic concerns.

About two years ago there was a tidal wave, pun intended, of permits that hit the state for tidal energy projects. Some speculated it was no more than multiple land grabs. Even the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission acknowledged the issue of and potential problems with "site banking" via the widespread acquisition of "preliminary permits."

Oceana Energy requested a permit for underwater turbines at the 280-yard opening at The Chops in Merrymeeting Bay. Little information was available for the extent of the project, except to say there could be up to 50 turbines each 20 feet to 50 feet wide, not unlike wind turbines we've become acquainted with, stretched across the small opening that drains the six rivers that comprise Merrymeeting Bay.

Up to 50 turbines: A 280-yard wide opening.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay intervened in order to be informed and also state our objections to placing one of these yet-to-be determined projects in a highly environmentally sensitive area without more scrutiny.

We just finished a long-term current study of the Bay. One might assume the water rushing down from six rivers would wash through to the ocean once it cleared the narrows at The Chops. But our study showed it is actually much the same water flowing back and forth through that very narrow opening constantly every day.

And back and forth with the current also go the sturgeon, salmon, alewives, seals, striped bass, eels, etc., not to mention, navigationally, the jet skis, power boats, ice breakers, sailboats, kayakers, canoeists and even four-foot pulp wood from years ago. An already ailing fishery would be subjected to numerous exposures to turbines hour after hour, day after day, week after week. Navigation also becomes a concern in an already turbulent section of river. Cumulative impact becomes a huge factor.

Alternative energy is critical to both our environmental and economic health. In the world's haste, partially to reduce CO2 emissions, partly to jump onto the latest moneymaker and partly to appear "Green" (greenwash), we have skipped some steps of wisdom in the "who, what, where, when" scenario.

While we may be running short of time to turn this environmental Titanic around, we surely have even less time for unintended consequences.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay rationally debated the pros and cons of a tidal project at The Chops. Because we work statewide on issues we hardly consider our approach "NIMBY" (used mostly but often without merit pejoratively, a term meaning "not in my back yard"). We believe there are many good places wide and deep enough along the Kennebec, and other rivers and bays that could host a pilot project.

The Chops, as a chokepoint for the entire 10,000 square mile watershed, is not one of them.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay did due diligence in our opposition to the tidal project at The Chops. There is little question we played a role in the decision to withdraw the permit and it is our hope it will not be a site in the future. Our determination was based on the bay being high value habitat for all 12 diadromous fish species of the Gulf of Maine and The Chops providing the only (and limited) access.

Our belief that we need to protect those nursery habitats and spawning grounds in order to revive our dying native fishing industry is both environmentally and economically based and we see great merit and wisdom in preventing a bad project planned for the wrong location.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay is pleased that METidal chose to forego the Chops project. We believe this benefits us both environmentally and economically. We are disappointed it chose to take a parting shot at our community by saying it was "local hostility" that determined its choice.

Evidence available shows we were resolute but well reasoned. We are not "local hostiles" but local advocates, a voice for the few places left natural, not despoiled for the sake of "progress." Oceana is making excuses for a bad idea gone south. We didn't bully them out of the area or harass them; we presented facts backed by pertinent research to reflect our position.

Our honest concerns don't make us hostile, just credible.

Ed Friedman is chairman of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay.

[letters@timesrecord.com](mailto:letters@timesrecord.com)