

How a Tiny New Jersey County United to Defeat Giant Ocean Wind Turbines

Residents, businesses, and elected officials joined to 'fight on every front.'



Ocean City's Robin Shaffer at a rally to prevent windfarms along the Jersey Shore.
(Courtesy of Robin Shaffer)

When Orsted, the giant Danish energy company, abandoned plans to construct 200 massive wind turbines in the Atlantic Ocean off southern New Jersey, residents and elected

officials in Cape May County celebrated.

"We were told time and time again, you can't take this company on," said Leonard C. Desiderio, director of the Cape May County Board of Commissioners, at a press conference on Nov. 1.

"Well guess what. They didn't know little Cape May County. They didn't know what they were up against. We were a fortress."

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In a statement announcing the end of the Ocean Wind 1 and Ocean Wind 2 wind farms, Mads Nipper, group president and CEO of Orsted, cited supply chain challenges, project delays, and rising interest rates.

"All of those things played a factor in Orsted's decision," said Michael J. Donohue, Cape May County's special counsel for wind energy issues, at a press conference.

"But there could be no doubt that what Cape May County did over the last two-and-a-half years to bring opposition to this project played a role in their decision to walk away."

The New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (BPU) awarded Orsted a contract to build offshore wind power generating facilities in 2019. The company holds a lease from the

federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) for approximately 161,000 acres of Atlantic Ocean waters and seabed.

Orsted planned to build 200 windmills, each 1,000 feet tall, 15 miles from the coast of Cape May County. Early on, the county Board of Commissioners became concerned about the scale and visibility of the project, and its potential effects on the local economy.

The board retained former New Jersey Superior Court Judge Michael J. Donohue, of Avalon, New Jersey, to manage the county's response. On May 24, 2021, he organized a meeting with Orsted representatives and 40 county officials.

According to a later resolution passed by the board, the meeting was cordial and informative, but Orsted showed no willingness to listen to suggestions from participants about reducing the impact and visibility of the windmills.

Then, less than 30 days later, the New Jersey Legislature passed a bill to strip approval authority from local elected officials and transfer it to the five unelected members of the BPU.

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"They dropped a bill in the State House to take way home rule so that local objections could be squelched and pushed

aside," Mr. Donohue told The Epoch Times.

"That really undermined Orsted's credibility with our elected officials, because in that two-plus hour meeting we had a few days before, they never brought it up. They never said, 'Hey, we want to make sure you all understand we're supporting this bill.'"

Cape May County officials continued to pursue discussions with Orsted, but they were unproductive.

"They would not discuss the possibility of reconfiguring the area of the lease, the array of the wind turbines and towers, pushing them further out," Mr. Donohue said. "Essentially their position goes, we're here just to get your consent, and you should give it to us, because this is inevitable."

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Cape May County commissioned visual simulations of how the Orsted windmills would appear from the beach. This would be the view from Plymouth Place and the Boardwalk in Ocean City, N.J. (Courtesy of the Cape May County Board of Commissioners)

On Feb. 22, 2022, Orsted used the new law against Ocean City, a Cape May County municipality. Orsted filed a petition with the BPU to override the city's objections to its environmental application, and to take real property from the city. Three months later, Orsted filed a similar petition against Cape May County.

After that, the county's strategy was to fight on every front, and raise every issue they could in good faith, Mr. Donohue said.

In the meantime, whales and dolphins started washing up dead along the Jersey Shore.

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According to data from the Marine Mammal Stranding Center in Brigantine, New Jersey, 11 whales, 23 dolphins, and two porpoises were stranded between December 2022 and March 2023.

No one wanted to see the whales die, Mr. Donohue said at the press conference, but it did crystalize public interest in what was happening in the ocean.

"We don't know what is killing whales and dolphins, but it's coincidental that all this offshore wind surveying activity is going on," Mr. Donohue said.

"They've said they don't know what's killing the whales either, but it's definitely not wind. How can those two things be true at the same time?"

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Conservation biologist and founder of the SaveOurWhalesNow organization, Trisha DeVoe, on Sept 6., 2023, in Belmar, New Jersey. (Richard Moore/The Epoch Times)

Robin Shaffer, of Ocean City, saw the dead whales and joined the effort to stop the windmills. He is now spokesman for Protect Our Coast New Jersey, a non-profit organization that is adamantly opposed to offshore wind development or any industrialization of the ocean.

Media outlets have reported that the group was funded by fossil fuel interests.

Mr. Shaffer says it's not true.

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"We believe that even one of these massive skyscrapers in the ocean is a bad idea from an environmental and economic standpoint," Mr. Shaffer told The Epoch Times.

"It doesn't matter how far away from the coast they're built, either. We think that they make absolutely zero sense, from an economic or environmental standpoint."



Anti-wind-project activist Bob Stern, a retired Department of Energy analyst and president of Save Long Beach Island on Sept. 6, 2023. (Richard Moore/The Epoch Times)

The organization held multiple demonstrations and rallies over the summer to inform and educate the public.

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Every Saturday morning, the group waved signs and handed out flyers at the base of the Ninth Street Bridge into Ocean City—a location notorious for traffic jams as tourists drive into town for their stay at the beach. They gave out 20,000 flyers.

“We had over a 90 percent favorability towards our cause from the people that were coming onto the island,” Mr. Shaffer said. “Most people didn't even know what was going on until they heard about it from us.”

Cape May County is home to 95,000 year-round and 820,000 seasonal residents. Tourism is a \$7.4 billion industry. In 2019, commercial fishing contributed another \$270 million to the local economy.



Wind farm opponent Meghan Lapp of Seafreeze Limited on the New York/New Jersey Bight on Sept. 6, 2023. (Richard Moore/The Epoch Times)

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As information slowly seeped out about Orsted's plans, the business community became concerned. Orsted's own research projected that Cape May County could see a 15 percent decrease in tourism because of the windmills, according to the county resolution.

"None of us could absorb a 15 percent loss," said Barbara Stafford-Jones, president of the Cape May County Chamber of Commerce, which represents 808 members—mostly tourism-related businesses, told The Epoch Times.

"They gave us the percentage; we did the math," she added. Cape May County's tourism industry could lose \$1.1 billion.

The chamber polled its members. In a unanimous vote, the businesses wanted the chamber to take a stand against the windmills.

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"Nobody is against clean energy, and nobody is against alternatives to fossil fuels," Ms. Stafford-Jones said. "But this is being pushed through too quickly. Nobody understands the economic impacts."



Save Right Whales Coalition NJ spokesman David Shanker on Sept. 6, 2023. (Richard Moore/The Epoch Times)

Ms. Stafford-Jones said the county did an amazing job of coordinating the opposition. She commended Mr. Desiderio, director of the Cape May County Board of Commissioners, for uniting everyone.

"The magnitude of Orsted's decision cannot be overstated," she said. "I believe, and we believe on behalf of the chamber, all our efforts played a significant role in influencing Orsted's decision."

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Congressman Jeff van Drew, who hosted a Congressional

hearing on the windmills in Wildwood, New Jersey, on Mar. 16, 2023, agreed.

He said in a statement, "Orsted's offshore wind projects could not have been stopped without the help of Cape May County, Judge Donohue, all of the fantastic grassroots efforts that sprung up along the way, and most importantly the people of South Jersey."

All involved recognize that the battle isn't over. Orsted still holds the windfarm lease. It's still the policy of New Jersey and the government of the United States to pursue ocean wind energy.

Attorney Mr. Donohue points out that the federal government has plans to build wind farms from Maine to South Carolina.

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Cape May County has filed a lawsuit against multiple federal agencies, complaining that the government shortcut statutory and regulatory requirements that were enacted to protect the nation's environmental and natural resources.

The Cape May County Chamber of Commerce joined the lawsuit as a named plaintiff, as did other groups and businesses.

“They have to destroy hundreds of thousands, or if they do it all, millions of acres of the ocean floor, in order to build these things,” Donohue told The Epoch Times.

“That's not an exaggeration. What happens? They don't know.”

Mr. Donohue characterized the cancellation of Orsted's wind farms as “a great, great win in a battle of a much larger war that has to continue to go on.”