

“Our Fenner Wind Farm Story”

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It was almost 23 years ago that we built the home we hoped to retire in. While looking for land to build on, we searched high and low for a piece of property we could afford. We looked at the 3-acre parcel, that seemed so desolate, a number of times. We drove by in the early spring, trying to picture what it would be like atop this barren hillside in the cold, snowy months of a “Fenner winter.” The one thing we did know was that in the summer months there was a magnificent view to the west, and the sunsets were incredible. We wanted the peace and quiet of the country, and this seemed like our best bet. So, in April 1981, we started to clear the property and construction began on our new home.

During the first couple of years we planted over 1500 pines in the 2 acres behind our house. We hoped to be able to cut our own Christmas tree in a few years. Eventually we’d have our own little animal sanctuary where deer could have shelter and the birds my husband loves would flourish.

Over the years Mother Nature has had a hand in changing the landscape. Trees have grown and trees have fallen due to several ice storms. We have quite a lovely little forest out back now. The pines have grown to somewhere between 20 and 30 feet—but they are dwarfed by the giant wind turbines that now dominate the landscape no matter what direction we look.

Never in a million years did we expect to be surrounded by these towers that passersby find so mesmerizing in their short 10 or 15-minute visits.

It must have been about 5 years ago that we noticed the construction of a test tower directly to our south, in the farm field next to our house. Soon rumors of the “wind farm” began to swirl. Eventually town meetings started to take place and more information was forthcoming. We were never given a chance to vote on whether this project would actually become a reality. The other residents of the town of Fenner seemed rather excited; they felt this was the best thing to happen to our township in years. My husband and I were concerned about the alteration of the landscape and what effect this project would have on us personally. There were a few other families that, like us, would be surrounded by towers, and they were also concerned.

The developer met with a group of 5 families a number of times to explain the plans and reassure us that there would be very little change to the landscape. We were told they would only remove trees where absolutely necessary, and all the cables and wiring would be underground. He reiterated that noise would not be a problem. The placement of the towers was explained to us and he even sent us computer renderings of what they would look like from our homes.

We worried about our property values and how this would affect our appraisals. My husband and I never really considered selling our home because of the project; we have too much time invested to just pull up stakes and leave. We were told the developer would extend a contract to us that would protect our property values for a period of 3 years from the time the project became operational. Basically, if we decided to sell and were forced to sell at a lower price due to the impact of the wind farm, the developer would pay us the difference. We received paperwork and sent it off to our lawyer to verify that it was an appropriate means of protecting our property values. He explained that it looked fine; there was certainly no harm in signing but it really did nothing for us unless we decided to sell and unless we indeed sold at a lower price.

Although my husband and I were not planning to sell we signed the contract and waited for the developer to stop by and pick up the copies, as he said he would. Days passed and it seemed like he had dropped off the face of the earth. We were told he was off to work on a new project. I e-mailed him to let him know the copies were ready. We later found out that the developer had sold the entire project to another company. We still have the signed papers in an envelope but the time period has since passed. I don’t know if any of the other families have benefited from their contracts or not. One family has sold and moved away. We have had no contact with the other families; I have been told that one of the other families is in arbitration.

As the project began we knew we had been deceived. The number of workers and amount of construction equipment was staggering. We saw many hedgerows disappear as they cleared the way for access roads. That summer the dust covered every surface in my home. The crane used to lift the turbine as it is was placed on the tower is something to see, and of course people flocked to the site to watch the progress. Every time the crane had to be moved it was a major undertaking, as it didn’t even fit on the roads. The huge tracks it made as it moved slowly across the farm fields like a giant snail could be seen throughout that summer. Caravans of trucks came loaded with 100-ft rotor blades. It was a very hectic time as these workers went about their daily duties and the towers inched their way toward the sky. In the autumn of 2001 the project went online and most of the workers moved on to their next job.

As I sit in my kitchen and type this on my computer, I hear the constant hum of the blades. It's early November, a brisk day and of course the windows are closed, so that muffles the sound a little. In the summer, with the windows open, there is nothing to block out the humming or the grinding sound that the turbine makes when it is being turned. For those who haven't seen a wind tower up close, they are about the height of a 30-story building and the unit on top is the size of a small travel trailer. Because the wind constantly changes direction the blades have to be turned to catch the wind. Imagine turning a 24-ton object perched on top of a 200 ft tower. That takes a bit of force and at times the sounds emitted are rather eerie. Depending on the weather, it can sound like a grinding noise or at times the shrieking sound of a wild animal. In the winter the noise always seems much louder, perhaps because of the starkness of the season and lack of foliage to muffle the noise. Anyway, when people tell you that the wind towers are virtually noiseless, they haven't lived a couple of football fields away from one 24/7.

It has been 3 years now and I must say I will never get used to the view that greets me every time I drive home. On sunny days the towers are a bright white—a huge contrast to the beautiful blue sky. When it is gray and rainy they take on a gray color that almost, I repeat, almost, makes them disappear into the gloom of the day. In the heavy fog that frequently blankets our road they are virtually invisible; not even the red blinking lights can be seen. Regardless of whether you see them or not, you still hear them—even when they are not operating. When the brakes stop the rotors (because it's too windy), you hear a clunking and grinding that sounds like freight train cars colliding. And when it's time to start them again, you can at times liken it to the roar of a jet engine.

We have some absolutely gorgeous sunrises and sunsets in Fenner. As the sun slowly rises to the east of our house it usually bathes our bedroom wall with its rays. Unfortunately, we now get a strobe effect that can drive you absolutely crazy. It's commonly called the "flicker factor." As the sun shines through the rotors it creates a shadow pattern that you would liken to a strobe light. Because of the close proximity of 4 of the towers to our house, we get this light show at various times of the day, as the sun travels from east to west. Most of the time I have to close our shades to prevent this from giving me a migraine.

And speaking of light shows, we get the nighttime show as well. Each tower has red blinking lights on top of the turbine, so unless the shades are closed in the bedroom at night there is a constant red light blinking in perfect view as we lie in bed. We have always enjoyed watching the night sky, but now, as we drive toward our road, what one immediately notices is a huge cluster of blinking red lights.

In the past we would see thousands of Canada geese as they made their way to the local swampland for a well-needed rest during their long journey each fall. The snow geese, whose migration pattern brought them directly over us, have since found a more convenient route—at least I haven't seen them recently. Proponents of the wind farm would say it's not so, but after 20+ years I think we can vouch for the fact. Our surrounding cornfields used to be full of geese this time of year. Not anymore. It didn't happen overnight but, slowly, the numbers have dwindled.

We've read in the newspapers how good this is for our local economy. I would like to know who, locally, is benefiting other than the select few who have towers on their property and the individuals who have a weekly ad in our local paper advertising the sale of Wind Farm T-shirts, key chains and bumper stickers. Someone is benefiting from this project, but many of us are paying in ways that have no monetary price.

My family and I will continue to live on the property we call "home." We'll watch our trees grow, knowing they'll never be tall enough to block the view of the tower that looms just on the other side of them.

I wonder what these towers will look like in 20 years. Let's hope they are not rusting giants.