

Where Does the Valley Gets Its Power

(an exclusive for Blackstone Daily by Carol Masiello)

Did you know that New England power plants can generate about 25,000 megawatts of electricity a day across 7,000 miles of high capacity electric lines? The Blackstone Valley is part of this network and for some it is a fact to be proud of and to others it is a worrisome statistic.

The sudden explosion of power plants in the valley was spurred on by the deregulation of electricity in Massachusetts and high demand on the part of the American consumer. The year is 1998 and Chapter 146 of the Acts of 1997 comes into effect. This marks the Commonwealth's entry in the area of deregulation along with other states in the country. Nationwide 200 plants were built between 1996 and 2002 with 275 planned in the near future, all a product of deregulation (USA Today 5/15/02). Energy deregulation enables you to purchase the actual electricity that flows through your power lines, fostering competition among providers to get your business. Competition in the electric generation market is supposed to encourage innovation, efficiency, and improved service from all market participants to all consumers. To date, large businesses have benefited from the competition but the residential consumer has yet to see any advantages from deregulation. However in the area of innovation and efficiency, the goals set forth for the generating companies have been met. Through cooperation with the state environmental agencies, local environmental organizations and community activist groups, today's power plants emit lower amounts of poisonous emissions and use less water from local watersheds. Does this imply that there are no health hazards from electromagnetic fields and emissions, or that there are no environmental impacts? That is the core area of conflict when a plant seeks to build in a community.

During the late 1990's a generating plant-building boom was taking place and American National Power is the name most familiar to residents on the Massachusetts/Rhode Island line. American National Power (ANP) is a Houston based supply company with 28 power stations in 12 countries with enough power to light 20 million homes. In 1996 they purchased the former Enron plant in Milford and in 1997 began their efforts to build plants in the valley, starting with the town of Uxbridge. Their efforts in that town were unsuccessful because power plants were prohibited under a bylaw passed in the late 1980's. ANP went on to build two new state-of-the art plants in Bellingham and Blackstone, each one controversial. Florida Light and Power operates one of the oldest plants in the area in Bellingham and tried four times unsuccessfully to get another one built there. In ten miles of Bellingham Center are six power plants, all a result of deregulation and the catalyst for controversy. Signs welcoming them to "power plant ally" greeted travelers exiting I-495 in Bellingham. Letters to the Editor appeared in all the area newspapers almost daily urging an end to the burgeoning power plant population. Frustrated with being surrounded by generating plant stacks, the town of Franklin sued its neighbor Bellingham over the granting of a special zoning permit for ANP's intended plant on Maple Street. A \$2.5 million dollar settlement was reached between ANP and the town five years later. This mushrooming of proposed plants inspired Rep. Marie Parente (Milford) to file legislation to prevent power plants locating within ten miles of each other. The intent of the legislation was to prevent undue proliferation in the area caused by the valley's inexpensive land and the nearness to gas pipelines (plants are all gas fired and need proximity to gas lines). Concerns voiced by area residents and community activists encompassed environmental, health and declining property value. Some felt the huge stacks belching steam and the transmission wires running through open space were an unwelcome sight in a valley so long noted for its scenery.

Historically, the track record of power plants was a legitimate source of concern. Emissions violations, water usage and electromagnetic fields had been in the news for years as possible links to serious health/environmental problems. In 2001, ANP's gas-fired plant in Milford received one of the largest fines for emissions violations in the state's history; a \$1.1 million dollar penalty for polluting the air with nitrogen oxide, carbon monoxide and ammonia. In 1997 during a severe drought, the DEP's environmental strike force found a local trucking company supplying water to this plant (adjacent to the Charles River) with water illegally taken from the Blackstone River Basin. Water cannot be withdrawn and transferred between watersheds without permission from the DEP and the trucking company was fined \$90,000. Florida Light and Power (FLP) burns gas with oil as a backup and has been cited for high carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions. The Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA) has been proactive in advocating for improved water usage technology on the part of power plants. The concern for this group and others like it is the amount of water a plant needs daily to operate. CRWA fought ANP's plans to build water cooled plants because they can use up to 2.9 million gallons of water a day and there would be low stream flow and declining aquifer reserves so ANP switched to air-cooling (which only uses 14,000 gallons a day). The research concerning the effect of electromagnetic fields emanating from the transmission lines is fairly new, but preliminary results show no direct link between these lines and cancer. All experts agree however that more epidemiological research is needed in the field to study long-term effects.

With all the concerns about the safety of the plants and quality of life issues, why would any municipality want a plant within its boundaries? The plants contribute large sums of money to town coffers, as much as \$2 million dollars annually along with

many other perks. FLP originally offered to pay the town of Bellingham \$8 million dollars toward the cost of building the new high school in return for a zoning change necessary to build the plant. Town meeting voted not to grant this change and Land Court decreed this arrangement was "contract zoning" and ruled it illegal. An observation was made that FLP went the wrong route to get their plant; they went to the town instead of going to the neighbors. ANP met resistance, but not the defeat that FLP did. Why? Because ANP bought out everyone surrounding the new plant in Blackstone, right over into the town of Mendon. ANP purchased the 52 houses in Blackstone and Mendon above market value and sold them at as much as 36% below market value to people (cost of \$2.7 million). They donated 60 acres of land to Mendon for open space and agreed to continue to pay real estate taxes on the land. ANP met with the residents, CRWA, and town officials to ensure that all sides received what they wanted. Some accommodations went as far as placing awnings on the homes of residents in Franklin to block the view of the stacks in the distance. This way ANP avoids costly litigation and assures congenial relations with the community.

Not all concessions were as simple as awnings or planting shade trees. Blackstone and Bellingham both instituted Payment In Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) agreements with ANP where instead of the plant paying taxes directly into the general fund, the money is diverted in special accounts. In Blackstone, 90% of the revenue from ANP is placed in a Capitol Investment Fund and the money is appropriated by a 2/3 majority of town meeting. The money is used for capitol improvements like water/sewer infrastructure, and a new public library. Bellingham set up a Tax Stabilization Fund to help lessen sticker shock when the revenue from the plant goes away (payments are about \$2 million a year). ANP agreed to spend \$650,000 to improve water conservation in each community; the two towns and CRWA will divide \$1.3 million dollars with \$200,00 going to each town to aid residents faced with Title 5. An additional \$100,000 will be given each year for five years to CRWA for each town for water resource remediation and \$35,000 over five years for public education.

There is a price to be paid for America's greed for power, and the price is ugly stacks in the distance, stream billowing up to the sky and fear of cancer. Or, the price maybe new schools, new water treatment plants and sewer infrastructure improvements. It all depends on which side of the exhaust stack you live.