

We have energy-exporting clout

By COLIN READ

In My Opinion

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— The United States is a net energy importer. Recent figures have us importing approximately \$700 billion of oil each year. Add to that our imports of electricity and natural gas, and we see that we import energy that is equivalent to about 7 percent of our gross domestic product. On the heels of high oil prices, the energy industry is fast becoming one of our country's biggest businesses, rivaling health care and the auto industry. We have to envy our neighbors to the north. They sit on hundreds of billions of barrels of oil, in the Arctic and in non-conventional oil reserves in the Athabasca Tar Sands. Canada's dollar is strong because they are energy exporters, and the North Country is able to reap some of the benefits of Canada's good fortune. Imagine if the North Country were also an energy exporter. Well, actually we are. Let's look at some interesting facts.

In the last census, Clinton and Franklin counties had fewer than 100,000 households combined.

Now with 65 wind turbines coming on line in Altona, 67 in Churubusco, 71 in Chateaugay, another 14 in Belmont and more in the works, Franklin and Clinton counties should soon have the capacity to supply permanent and sustainable electric power to 200,000 homes. When the wind is blowing nicely, and of course it does where these turbines have been located, we can take care of our residential electric needs of our two counties -- and of Essex, Hamilton, Lewis, Saratoga, Warren and Washington counties, to boot. The projects in Clinton and Franklin counties can light up much of the state north of Albany.

This is another example of how progressive this region is, without even knowing it. I think it is important to get the word out. When we are finding ourselves devoting around 7 percent of our gross domestic product to foreign energy-exporting countries, it is quite an enviable position for two of our counties to be residential electric energy exporters for the rest of the state and the region.

If we can collectively come to the realization that the North Country is on the leading edge of what will likely be the next big economic wave, we can better embrace our own economic destiny. Just as this supply-chain region is uniquely adapted to moving goods, one of our other competitive advantages shall be clean and renewable energy production. And, once we broadly recognize all of our competitive advantages and enhance and celebrate them, we shall be in the wonderful position of dictating rather than simply accepting our economic destiny.

There are a couple of wonderful facets that typify the North Country character. One is a sense of resilience that allows us to pull up our sleeves and get to work when times require us to do so. The other is our ability to recognize a good thing when we see it. We saw these characteristics as we redefined ourselves in the wake of the Air Force Base closure. And I think we shall see those characteristics again as the economy, and especially energy independence, challenges us all across the nation. The North Country should welcome energy independence, in more ways than we once might have thought.

So let us be imaginative about how we can best take part in an energy revolution. Conservation is of course a part of it. But the development of alternatives to oil must also play a critical role in a new energy policy. The North Country's character and physical attributes will allow us to play a role in fostering energy independence. I know the North Country is up to the task. After all, the nation and the state are depending on us!

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