

The Times Record

Tidal energy project sinks

By Seth Koenig, Times Record Staff

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BATH — A company that considered placing an underwater tidal energy project on a section of the Kennebec River between Bath and Woolwich has curtailed the effort, due to what a company official described as “local hostility.”

The head of a local environmental preservation group, in contrast, called Maine Tidal Energy’s decision to pull the plug on its Kennebec River proposal “wonderful news.”

This week, the Maine Tidal Energy Co. officially surrendered its federal permit to study the site, which is situated between Chops Point in Woolwich and West Chops Point in Bath.

Ed Friedman, of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, said his organization was the only party to oppose the project on environmental grounds.

“It’s wonderful news for us,” Friedman told The Times Record on Tuesday. “It’s obvious that it’s the right decision, but it’s unfortunate that we were the only group that opposed it from the beginning. It’s not the sort of project that you put right in the only path of migratory fish that use the Kennebec and Androscoggin river systems.”

Mike Hoover serves as general counsel for the Washington D.C.-based Oceana Energy Co., the parent firm of Maine Tidal Energy. In a letter filed with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Sunday, Hoover wrote that the company “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.”

In response to an inquiry from The Times Record seeking additional details, Hoover wrote in an e-mail simply that “local hostility” deterred the company from pressing forward with the site. He added that he had “no further comment” on the subject.

Approximately a year ago, FERC granted Maine Tidal Energy Co. a preliminary permit, good for 36 months, to study the feasibility of what the company called the Kennebec Tidal Energy Hydroelectric Project.

According to the FERC documentation, the proposed project would have consisted of 50 Tidal In-Stream Energy Conversion (TISEC) devices, rotating propeller blades, integrated generators of 0.5 to 2.0 megawatts of power — totaling 100 megawatts — an anchoring system, mooring lines, submerged cable and interconnection transmission lines.

The project’s developers estimated an annual generation of 438 gigawatt hours per unit per year, which would be sold to a utility.

But after FERC granted the preliminary permit, Friends of Merrymeeting Bay filed paperwork calling for the commission to reconsider the move.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay objected, in part, to the permit issuance because the group was concerned about the unknown environmental impact of the technology proposed for the site. The organization also argued that the commission did not give adequate consideration to factors such as fish passage when approving Maine Tidal Energy’s application.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission denied the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay’s request, responding in its documentation that the preliminary permit didn’t give Maine Tidal Energy the authority to cross private properties or install any intrusive machinery.

The commission instead claimed that it issued the permit so the company could, in part, study the potential environmental impacts and determine if the project is feasible.

But despite the initial backing by FERC, Maine Tidal Energy and its parent company, Oceana Energy, called it quits on the project Sunday.

Friedman admitted that he “was actually a little surprised” by the move.

“In our lust for alternative energies, we often lose sight of the balance necessary in producing that energy,” he said. “As we bring on alternative or ‘green’ energies, particularly as they get into areas that are tender, we’re never talking about taking ‘dirty’ power off-line. We’re just making more. There’s not any attendant conservation tied to the compromising of a natural resource, and there should be.”

skoening@timesrecord.com