

Polling project educates public on energy policy

By JOHN FROONJIAN

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Barbara Knee, of Mount Laurel, Burlington County, showed up at Richard Stockton College on Saturday certain that wind farms are bad for the environment, and that is what she told other members of a focus group.

"Offshore, there are lots of problems. They're in the flight paths of many birds," Knee said. "Also, a huge amount of noise is generated by these things."

Knee, 70, and nearly three dozen other southern New Jersey residents and Stockton faculty and staff gave up a day off Saturday to immerse themselves in energy policy.

They signed up for a social science experiment called deliberative polling, which tests whether deliberations and education change results in issue-oriented surveys.

They did. The participants had previously been part of an 800-person survey about energy. After a day of discussing nuclear and wind power and of questioning experts, the group's opinions had changed.

Saturday's survey results released by Stockton showed: more support for wind farms and nuclear plants and a greater emphasis on environmental protection; increased willingness to pay more for nuclear power (40 to 51 percent) and wind energy (63 to 87 percent); and more agreed it is important to save energy (35 to 55 percent).

The college's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy is one of only 14 institutions nationwide in the polling project designed to stimulate discussion.

Project advocates say policy can be influenced by relatively uninformed opinions expressed in surveys, but opinions change once people are exposed to facts.

Hughes Center Director Sharon Schulman said the Stockton event can help educate the public as energy issues take priority. A video of Saturday's meetings will be posted on the college's Web site, www.stockton.edu.

The participants broke into small groups to talk, first about nuclear energy.

Nick Mangold, a retired electrician from Galloway Township, Atlantic County, said the risks of nuclear power pale in comparison to the danger of car accidents and crime.

"A new power plant would create 1,400 to 1,800 (construction) jobs and 700 permanent jobs," said

Elizabeth Askew, 42, of Burlington Township, Burlington County.

"I don't think the focus should be on creating jobs," Knee said. "I think security and the environment are more important."

After more than an hour, the groups reassembled to pose questions to Stockton professors Tait Chirenje and Patrick Hossay. The experts said nuclear power is seen as affordable, although plants are expensive to build.

Hossay, a political science and environmental professor, said the industry believes spent nuclear plant rods could be stored safely for 200 to 400 years, but they stay radioactive for up to hundreds of thousands of years.

Chirenje, an environmental chemist, noted that European countries reprocess the waste to produce more energy. But that also produces plutonium, which is used in nuclear weapons.

In the afternoon, the participants met again to talk about wind energy.

Knee initially claimed wind turbines pose a danger to birds. Mangold said he feared a hurricane could destroy an offshore wind farm. Photographer Donna Connor, of Mullica Township, Atlantic County, said wind is inexhaustible and windmills don't cause pollution.

At one point, Barbara Wilson, of Avalon, Cape May County, asked Knee: "What's your solution to the energy problem?"

"I don't have one," Knee said. "That's why I'm here."

Chirenje told participants that less than one of every 10,000 bird deaths is caused by a wind turbine. However, bats have died from changes in air pressure when they fly close to windmill blades, he said.

Hossay said a turbine has never fallen down. And Chirenje said he once stayed in a dorm near windmills the size of turbines in Atlantic City, and "I could not hear them."

The day wrapped up after people questioned Jeanne Fox, the N.J. Board of Public Utilities president, and state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic. The policymakers fielded questions on the electrical grid status, availability of stimulus funds for energy projects and ratepayer protections.

Knee was surprised by her answers in the final survey.

"My opinions changed very much," she said.

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