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DiMasi pledges a vote on wind farm

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By Peter J. Howe, Globe Staff | January 17, 2008

House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi, who outraged legislators from coastal communities by ramming through an amendment changing an ocean-protection law that could help a close friend's wind-farm plan, promised yesterday there will be a full debate and vote on the amendment.

The pledge was made two months after the House passed a wide-ranging energy bill that had a last-minute DiMasi amendment exempting offshore wind farms from certain restrictions in the state's Ocean Sanctuaries Act. The act bans or sharply restricts most construction in waters close to shore.

The only pending proposal directly helped by the amendment, critics said, is a 120-turbine wind project off Dartmouth and Mattapoisett proposed by Boston construction mogul Jay Cashman. DiMasi and his wife are close social friends of Cashman and his wife, so close that DiMasi sent a letter to the state Ethics Commission last year disclosing the relationship, in hope of defusing any conflict-of-interest charges that might arise around legislation adopted by the House affecting Cashman businesses.

Cashman advisors - including former state environmental affairs secretary John P. DeVillars, who is now a consultant - said the amendment added to the House bill only cleared up badly drafted, conflicting language in the ocean act. The law never banned wind farms offshore, and the amendment gave no special break to Cashman, said DiMasi and Cashman aides.

But environmentalists, including the Audubon Society and Conservation Law Foundation, strongly denounced the amendment, saying it eviscerated sanctuary act controls over offshore wind.

Several legislators from South Coast towns said that DiMasi had blindsided them by whisking through, with no floor debate, an amendment that at the least appeared to some to be a favor for a DiMasi friend.

"The speaker acknowledged that he was at fault, and the energy bill will not be moved until we have an up-or-down vote on this amendment," said Representative John F. Quinn, a New Bedford Democrat. "I would characterize it as a win for openness and transparency."

"We'll have the full debate we should have had," said Representative David B. Sullivan, a Fall River Democrat.

Last month the Senate approved its own version of the energy bill. House and Senate leaders now have to negotiate a compromise energy bill to go back to each chamber for final approval. DiMasi is promising that the House won't take the final vote on the energy bill until the changed wording on the Ocean Sanctuary Act is debated and voted on.

DiMasi's spokesman, David Guarino, said, "There were concerns raised about the process. The speaker said that he accepted responsibility for that.

"It wasn't the way that it was intended to happen, and now we're going to have a debate on the oceans bill," Guarino said. "He's more than happy to do that."

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