

OPINION

Op-ed: Clean energy can't come at the cost of clean water or local control



By **AARON LANGLOIS**

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In recent guest commentaries and a televised interview, Joe Curtatone — President of the Alliance for Climate Transition (ACT) and a registered lobbyist — applauded Massachusetts' aggressive push for battery energy storage systems (BESS). He framed local opposition as a barrier to climate progress. As one of the small rural towns in Central Massachusetts, Oakham is not standing in the way of clean energy. We're standing up for something just as vital: clean water, community safety, and the fundamental right of residents to shape decisions that impact their town.

The Clean Energy Bill passed by the Massachusetts Legislature last year gave developers the ability to bypass local zoning laws when siting large-scale BESS facilities. Under this law, even if a town has adopted local zoning rules — like Oakham has — developers can now appeal directly to state agencies, whose leadership serves under the very administration driving the Clean Energy agenda. This is a classic David vs. Goliath scenario: small communities facing billion-dollar energy companies backed by government policy, powerful lobbying groups, and legal teams—while residents are left to defend their safety and water supplies with no paid staff and no budget.

Here in Oakham, we already passed a BESS zoning bylaw, approved by then-Attorney General Maura Healey, that lays out thoughtful local conditions for siting. These rules were enacted not to block clean energy, but to ensure safe, scientifically sound, and appropriately located development. Yet under the new state law, these local protections can be set aside— not by a court, but by administrative action. The same executive agencies promoting the BESS agenda are now charged with ruling on whether a local bylaw like ours can be ignored.

This is not democracy. It's a top-down override of community-based planning.

Right now, a company called Rhyndland Energy is proposing to install a massive lithium-ion battery facility on a former junkyard on Coldbrook Road. The site was never properly decommissioned. Rusting cars, tires, fuel

containers, and batteries remain scattered across the landscape. It abuts protected DCR watershed land—part of the Ware River Watershed, which supplies drinking water to over 3 million Massachusetts residents.

No responsible clean energy advocate would suggest placing volatile, fire-prone lithium batteries on a contaminated site near sensitive wetlands and public water infrastructure—yet the law, as written, permits it.

Yes, battery storage plays a role in a sustainable energy grid. But BESS technology carries real risks: fires, explosions, and toxic chemical releases. These aren't hypothetical. Incidents have occurred in other states and countries, requiring specialized containment teams and prolonged response. Oakham, like many rural towns, lacks the infrastructure or emergency personnel to manage such a disaster. In a wooded region with drought conditions and limited access roads, one BESS fire could spark a catastrophe.

Joe Curtatone accuses residents of “fear and misinformation,” invoking the tired trope of NIMBYism. But this fight isn't about politics or paralysis. It's about governance, accountability, and science-based planning. We're not saying “not in our backyard.” We're saying: not irresponsibly, not without remediation, and not without community input.

In response to a postcard received by a limited number of Oakham abutters on March 21, our community came together to form a nonprofit — TheACORNS.org (Advocates for Conservation of Oakham's Rural Nature & Safety). We are a grassroots coalition of Oakham residents and supporters from across Massachusetts, united in our commitment to transparency, responsible development, and local input. We accept no corporate or government funding, employ no lobbyists or paid staff, and are powered entirely by volunteers who care deeply about environmental protection and public health — not just for Oakham, but for the 3.1 million people who rely on the Quabbin Reservoir and its surrounding watersheds for clean drinking water.

Massachusetts can be a leader in clean energy, but that leadership must be just, inclusive, and grounded in science and democracy. Rural towns like Oakham are not obstacles to progress — they are stewards of vital natural resources and deserve to be treated as partners, not pawns.

Let's not pit climate action against public health. Let's demand a transition that respects both the planet and the people who live on it.

Aaron Langlois is a registered nurse, nonprofit healthcare executive, and lifelong Oakham resident. He serves as co-chair of TheACORNS.org, a nonprofit committed to protecting the rural environment, natural resources, and public safety of Oakham.