

OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: How close we came to having three Pilgrim nukes in Plymouth

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It was only in 1980 that Pilgrim dropped the moniker "Pilgrim 1."

By Bill Abbott

These days it is obvious when we speak of the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Plant that we mean that giant cube down on the Manomet waterfront. But it was only in 1980 that Pilgrim dropped the moniker "Pilgrim 1," because before that date there was lurking on the drawing boards a Pilgrim 2 and a Pilgrim 3. These additional units were to be built alongside Pilgrim 1. This would have comprised quite a nifty concentration of nukes, similar to the Fukushima complex in Japan that suffered the simultaneous meltdowns in three of its reactors in 2011. We came closer, I think, than people realize to having three operating nukes in Plymouth.

I moved to Plymouth with my family in 1973, lured by the promise of open space, ponds and the ocean. I had heard that a nuclear plant had just opened a few years previous but paid little attention initially, until I read a story in the local paper that Pilgrim's original owner, Boston Edison, had applied to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to build two additional units. Pilgrim 2 was to open in 1975 and Pilgrim 3 a couple of years later. The news story said that Boston Edison and the NRC anticipated a fast track approval process since the site had been thoroughly vetted. The story concluded by noting that there was no known opposition. The additional units were to be a slam dunk.

Since the site was less than five miles from my home, and I knew something about nuclear energy having majored in physical sciences, I decided to look into commercial nuclear power plants sited in residential areas and the issues beginning to be raised by its opponents. The more I read, the more alarmed I became.

With assistance from the Union of Concerned Scientists, I formed Plymouth County Nuclear Information Center (PICNIC) that recruited local members and researched the issues. PICNIC intervened in every legal proceeding involving the approval of Pilgrim 2 and 3, including NRC licensing proceedings and state and federal environmental proceedings for water discharge permits. We also challenged Boston Edison at the Energy Facilities Siting Council and filed suit in Plymouth Superior Court to challenge the zoning permit – and this was just for starters. During the first two years of our fight there was little other opposition to the proposed nukes. At hearing after hearing I would be the only intervener, everyone else in the room being nuclear engineers, university experts, and business-types in favor.

Being involved in so many simultaneous proceedings paid off. When Boston Edison told the NRC that it was in strong financial shape and could easily bear the financial burden of the new nukes, PICNIC introduced testimony from the state Department of Public Utilities Department (DPU) that showed Boston Edison literally begging for dollars from rate payers to build the plants – its finances were on shaky ground and it desperately needed relief from the DPU. On the other hand, during DPU proceedings, PICNIC introduced testimony from the NRC case showing that Boston Edison claimed robust finances.

Two years after filing with the NRC, Boston Edison cancelled Pilgrim 3 in 1975. Its focus shifted to winning approval of Pilgrim 2. How close did they get? Very, very close. Boston Edison was so sure Pilgrim 2 would be approved that it went ahead and built components off-site costing between \$250 million and \$300 million, which it could not bring to Plymouth while cases were pending. The NRC, ever willing to help out a proposed nuke in trouble, at one point even granted a “limited work authorization work permit” to allow certain construction to proceed on Pilgrim 2. But PICNIC challenged this, and it was eventually reversed by the NRC Appeals Board. That was the closest we ever came to having Pilgrim 2 become a reality. Pilgrim 2 was cancelled in 1980.

Finally we are looking at a date – 2019 – for the closure of Pilgrim. That date cannot come soon enough. Many think, and I share their view, that Pilgrim has been an albatross around the town's neck for the last 40 years. But what a nightmare it would have been to have to contend at the same time with a Pilgrim 2 and even a Pilgrim 3.

Bill Abbott has lived in Plymouth since Pilgrim first came on line, and has a law practice in Boston specializing in zoning and land use litigation and environmental law. He supports the work of local citizen groups such as Cape Cod Bay Watch.