**May the wind be always at your back: New Bedford leaders, Irish talk turbines**

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NEW BEDFORD — City officials and business leaders touted New Bedford's potential as a hub for offshore wind energy to a group of marine industry professionals who were visiting the city Friday from Ireland.

"It's easy to scoff at this type of exchange, but you really see an awful lot of connections made," said John Miller, of the New England Marine Renewable Energy Center, who participated in the seminars along with New Bedford Economic Development Council executive director Matthew Morrissey. "You never know what connections like this are going to generate."

The eight visitors were in town as part of a 10-day, State Department-funded exchange program run by Boston College's Irish Institute, which tries to promote peace and reconciliation between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

This is the third year an Irish Institute group has visited New Bedford as part of the exchange. The group will also visit Woods Hole and Miami, among other places.

"Building networks is really important to us," said Irish Institute Director Robert Mauro. "Not only do they build relationships as a group but with their American counterparts."

Wind energy is emerging as an increasingly prominent sector in Ireland, which, like Massachusetts, hopes to capitalize on nearby wind reserves.

"It's a major area of focus for the government and it's important to the economy of Massachusetts," Mauro said.

Davey Hill, 47, of Killkeel, Ireland, said the group of fishermen he belongs to has begun to diversify into offshore energy, a possible model for New Bedford.

"It's diversification of the fisheries," he said, adding that he had also learned a lesson from the city's focus on pricey scallops.

"They're spending time on a high-value product to get a high return,"

he said.