

County weighs pros and cons of wind farms

By Nancy Lindsey

County Administrator Regena Handy confirmed in a news release March 31 that the Patrick County Board of Supervisors has been approached by a company interested in locating windmill turbines, or "wind farms," in Patrick County.

"The board of supervisors is not in negotiation with anyone regarding location of windmill turbines or windmill farms in Patrick County," the news release stated. "However, the board has been contacted by and received information from a company which has expressed an interest in this matter."

Handy said in the news release that the board of supervisors is "investigating all the facts relating to the possible project and currently weighing pros and cons of wind turbines."

"It is our understanding that Patrick County is only one of several counties that this company is looking at for this project," Handy said.

The news release was distributed to the local media during the first day of a two-day strategic planning retreat held by the board of supervisors in the Patrick County Veterans Memorial Building.

The topic of windmill turbines was not discussed in open session by the full board during the retreat, but was apparently discussed in telephone conversations prior to the retreat.

The issue has been discussed during call-in shows on WHEO radio recently, with two Patrick residents reporting contacts from an industrial wind facility company. According to those reports, the company has expressed interest in locating windmills in the Bull Mountain area of Patrick Springs and in the Belcher Mountain area of Meadows of Dan.

A proposal to start an industrial wind utility in Highland County has generated a windstorm of controversy for the past three years and is now being considered by the State Corporation Commission.

If approved, it would be the first such facility in Virginia.

Most residents of the state's most sparsely populated county have expressed opposition to the proposed project, saying they don't want to see their Allegheny Mountain ridges marred by 400-foot towers.

Opponents say the wind turbines would be harmful to the unusual Alpine landscape and wildlife habitat of Highland county; kill bats, songbirds, and raptors such as golden eagles; ruin the mountain views and hurt tourism; cause noise and light pollution; and diminish real estate values.

Others opposed to the project in Highland County also say the turbines are not an efficient means of producing energy. "The estimated annual production for the Highland New Wind Development project would effectively provide about eight hours of Virginia's total annual electricity requirements," scientist Rick Webb of Monterey wrote in the March 17 edition of *The Recorder*, a newspaper that serves Bath and Highland Counties. "The estimated August production for the HNWD project would effectively provide about 16 minutes of Virginia's total electricity requirement for the month of August."

Proponents say wind energy is a clean and renewable form of energy with the potential to provide additional revenues for both landowners and county government.

"Wind energy environmental impacts are minimal compared to those resulting from the harvesting, distribution and combustion of fossil fuels," Tracey and James Blagg of Doe Hill wrote in a comment to the SCC, published in the March 17 edition of *The Recorder*. "Based on observations of industrial wind turbines in Europe, California, and West Virginia, we do not feel their presence adversely affects the view. We would much rather see industrial wind turbines than the numerous cell phone towers that dot the Virginia countryside..."