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Wind farm plan opposed in Highland

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Friday, October 22, 2004

MONTEREY - Two hours of public comments from Highland County residents and property owners on a proposed industrial wind farm netted two hours of opposition and not a word in favor.

The county's four-person planning commission, however, defied the nearly unanimous sentiment of about 120 people packed inside the Highland courthouse and kept alive proposed ordinance changes that could pave the way for the development.

Landowner Henry T. McBride has requested a permit to build as many as 22 wind turbines that would rise 400 feet above undeveloped land near the West Virginia border. McBride also asked for an ordinance change that would exempt the windmills from the county's height restrictions.

The development as proposed would be Virginia's first industrial-scale wind farm, an alternative energy trend that some hope - and others fear - would expand eastward from West Virginia, where such windmills operate now, and gain a foothold here. Another wind farm has been proposed for the Eastern Shore.

Highland's three-member Board of Supervisors, which met jointly with the planning commission last night, did not act on the requests for the height exemption and the conditional-use permit.

Supervisor Jerry Rexrode believed the county needed more time to see how zoning laws could square with the wind-farm proposal.

"I think that when the zoning ordinance was written, windmills weren't even an issue," Rexrode said.

The issue pits the value of Highland's unique, pristine landscape against the county's uniquely strong sustained winds.

The county's winds are among the best suited on the East Coast for generating energy, experts have said.

Those who spoke at yesterday's hearing unanimously favored preserving the county's virginal view sheds of mountains and hills.

Robert Maupin, a Louisa County resident who owns property in McDowell, told commissioners that Highland's landscape should be preserved in the same spirit that the nation preserves national park and forest land.

"I believe Highland County . . . is such a place and deserves such protection," Maupin said.

Peter Mennen, a California transplant and Highland property owner, warned county officials against introducing wind turbines that he thinks blight the land on the West Coast.

Frequent break-downs and heavy-equipment repairs would cause disruption in the county if the wind farm is developed, Mennen said.

"This kind of turbine farm is going to create a whole legion of problems that you don't even see," he said.

McBride has suggested that the windmills could be tourist draws. Charlotte Stephenson, president of the Highland

Chamber of Commerce, disagrees.

In an interview outside the meeting, Stephenson said McBride's proposal would only draw more wind developers who would have to shave the ridge tops to plant turbines.

"It would cause the landscape to be drastically altered," Stephenson said. "The beauty of the county is what . . . keeps us here."

Commissioner Jacob Hevener refused to bow to the sentiment of the courthouse audience, arguing as the audience gasped that landowners should have some freedom to use their property for a profit.

Fear of change should not guide local government policy - especially considering all the change brought to Highland with the recent influx of absentee property owners, Hevener said.

"In the last five years, I've seen more change in this county than I've seen in 25 years," he said.

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