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Turbines stir up flurry of worries

Patrick County residents express their concerns about property values, viewsheds and nature.

By [Mason Adams](#)
981-3149

STUART -- Dozens of Patrick County residents and landowners expressed their concerns Monday about the possible construction of more than 20 400-foot wind turbines on prominent ridges near Patrick Springs and Meadows of Dan.

More than 25 people spoke before the county board of supervisors, with most either skeptical or outright opposed to the wind farm idea. They were concerned about effects on their land values, county tourism, the environment and what would happen if the company, Community Energy of Wayne, Pa., were to fold.

Eric Johnson said he chose to retire in Patrick County "mostly because of the scenery and abundant wildlife." But construction of the turbines could damage both, he said.

"No one will assert that these man-made eyesores improve any view," Johnson said. "In fact, they detract significantly from it, and views are extremely important to property values in this section of the country."

Another resident, Bob Gorp, expressed how some county conservationists found themselves in a quandary, caught between support for alternative energy sources and the possibility of 400-foot turbines within sight of their homes.

"You can't sit there on one hand and say we should do what we can to wean ourselves away from coal or oil or nuclear, but then say 'It's got to be somewhere else because I don't want to participate,'" Gorp said.

For about a year, Community Energy has been looking at private land in Patrick County for construction of wind turbines to generate electricity.

The company is interested in building up to 25 turbines, which would generate two megawatts of power each, according to Chris Hutter, a consultant for the company. Two megawatts can provide power to about 600 homes, Hutter said. It's focused largely on Belcher Mountain, near Meadows of Dan, and Bull Mountain, near Patrick Springs.

Patrick County has no zoning ordinance, so last month the board of supervisors voted to pass a 60-day emergency ordinance to prohibit the construction of any structure more than 100 feet in height. That ordinance will expire June 10.

Hutter said that if the company does decide to pursue the project, it will be a year before it decides whether it's feasible to build in Patrick County, and at least two years before any construction would begin.

"I can't say strongly enough how far away we are from saying we have a project," Hutter said.

Community Energy, which has wind farms throughout the midwestern and northeastern United States, supplies wind-generated electricity to more than 75,000 residential and business customers and 18 utilities.

Matt Heck, a spokesman for Community Energy, tried to address residents' concerns about noise, property values, tourism and the environment.

Many residents weren't buying it, citing other sources to counter Heck's. Several claimed the company was more interested in federal subsidies than in creating "green" energy.

But others said bringing wind turbines to Patrick County would be a good idea.

"It's absolutely mind-boggling to think we could be on the forefront of an energy source that's green and clean," said Richard Kreh. "It's not just what's for me, it's what's for the country. We can make a contribution."

Other residents had yet to make up their minds.

"I don't know yet if I'm pro or con," said Tiffany Worthington of Meadows of Dan. "I've got so much information from so many sources that I don't know what to believe."

Supervisor Danny Foley said after the meeting he still opposes the idea.

"I see the mountains as something we need to protect," Foley said.

Board chairman Roger Martin, on the other hand, said he was "strongly in favor of it," based on personal property rights and interest in encouraging alternative energy sources.

Supervisors will reconsider the emergency ordinance June 5.