

Guides for wind farm get initial OK

Ashe commissioners approve an ordinance for wind energy

By Monte Mitchell
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Ashe County commissioners approved an ordinance yesterday to govern wind-energy systems, a response to a proposed commercial wind farm of 25 to 28 windmills.

There was no discussion by commissioners before the 4-0 vote, which followed a 90-minute public hearing. During the public hearing, 13 people spoke in opposition to the wind farm, 11 spoke in favor of it, and three people didn't take a position but offered suggestions for the proposed ordinance.

Before the hearing began, Ashe Board of Commissioners Chairman Richard Blackburn explained to the audience that the county's lack of a comprehensive land-use plan meant that commissioners could not ban windmills.

"The only thing that can happen is we can regulate," he said. "We cannot prohibit. That's a very significant thing to remember."

There's controversy about whether the state's Ridge Law prohibits wind turbines of an industrial scale.

The wind turbines would be more than 300 feet tall on or near Big Springs Mountain. The developer hasn't specified a model wind turbine, but said he would probably use a helicopter for much of the construction, according to testimony filed with the N.C. Utilities Commission.

Interpretation of the Ridge Law is key to whether the proposed wind farm would be allowed, both sides in the debate have said.

Ashe's ordinance includes a setback that says a large wind-energy system shall not be allowed within 1,700 feet of any home or commercial building.

Lou Zeller, of the Glendale Springs-based Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, told commissioners during the public hearing that a 1,700-foot setback would prohibit the proposed wind farm. He spoke in favor of wind energy and the wind farm.

Richard Calhoun, the former Ashe County commissioner who is proposing to build the wind farm, said during the hearing that Ashe and the other mountain counties are suited for wind energy.

"I'm convinced we can do this project without destruction of our beloved mountains," he said. "Big Springs is a sacred place to me."

He said he believes the Ridge Law excludes windmills. "These are windmills," he said. "I don't see the debate."

Calhoun, who sometimes was at odds with his fellow commissioners during his last term, reminded them that he loved a "good debate."

"Anything controversial I love," he said, in his opening remarks. In his closing remarks, he jokingly suggested a visual tax.

"Anyone who wants to look at our mountains could pay \$1 per minute," he said. "Fair is fair."

Jay Vincent, a Blowing Rock-based Realtor and developer, said he uses the term "specialness" to describe what most people enjoy about Ashe.

"I know nobody likes to be told what to do with their land, but at times like this, comprehensive plans or regulations sure look good," he said. "The windmill farm will be very detrimental to the specialness of this county."

Vincent reminded the board that when he was telling commissioners last spring about plans to build a ski resort on Phoenix Mountain, that Calhoun was the only county commissioner to speak against it.

"He said he wanted Ashe County to stay the way it was," Vincent said.

Later in the hearing, Ann Rose, of Lansing, said she supports the windmills and is much more concerned about Phoenix Mountain. She said that the ski towers and lifts look similar to transmission poles and wires, but "we don't hear anybody complaining about their views."

The five-member board must approve the wind-energy ordinance on a second reading for it to become effective. Blackburn said they plan to consider it for second reading at their next regularly scheduled meeting on Feb. 19. Commissioner Marty Gambill was absent yesterday.

The N.C. Utilities Commission, which will decide whether to issue the certificate of public convenience and necessity that would allow the project, will hold a public hearing on the matter at 9:30 a.m. Feb. 13 in Raleigh.

Monte Mitchell can be reached in Wilkesboro at 336-667-5691 or at mmitchell@wsjournal.com