

John R. Sweet

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Sent: Wednesday, 11 August, 2004 02:50
Subject: Highland wind

To the News Leader editorial board:

Your editorial of 8 August on industrial wind turbines in Highland County contains many errors of fact and relies on shallow research in support of its position.

"a locally based company -- New Highland Wind -- to construct 20 electricity-generating wind turbines...."

The company is Highland New Wind Development LLC, which is owned by the McBride family, who own the land in Highland County but they do not live here and the company is not based here.

"From a purely aesthetic viewpoint, the choice is clear. Measured against the impact such a project might have on Highland County's economy, however, it is not. According to the 2000 Census, Highland County residents have a median income of about \$30,000; about 21 percent of the county's population lives below the poverty level; 20 percent of Highland County's residents work in the construction industry. Would a project of the magnitude of that proposed by New Highland Wind help Highland County's economy? It surely wouldn't hurt."

I won't question your facts here as I do not have the data at hand but the conclusion of way off base. It might not hurt but it might be devastating. We can't know for sure and that is one of the issues. The only growth industry here is tourism. Highland County is being asked to be the guinea pig for the state, asked to sacrifice its landscape and tourist industry in return for short-term tax benefits that may themselves be illusory.

As far as the construction industry goes, contractors here are run off their feet. They are small-scale operations and all are busy. There are long waits to get porches built, let alone industrial plants. If this project is to be built, large contractors with specialized equipment will be brought in from outside with little benefit to the local economy. Local convenience stores will see a spike in sales during construction and local contractors may get to nibble at a few crumbs. A few tourists may even come to gawk at the spectacle but that will not last. The tourists we really want, those who return year after year to revel in the glory of the mountains, will be put off by this gross intrusion on what they have come here for.

"But would it be worth lining the county's two highest points with high-tech windmills? Purists would answer that question with an unequivocal 'no.' Out-of-work residents or those who want Highland County to have a brighter

economic future might feel differently."

The ridges in question are not our two highest points, though they are high enough to allow these structures to be seen for miles. Out-of-work residents who are willing and able to work are few in number and this project will do little to help them. Many residents who want a brighter economic future are very concerned about the effects of this project and future ones on other sites, which will inevitably follow once the door is opened.

"Weighed against the other things that could conceivably be put up in Highland County - cell phone towers, power-generating stations that produce pollution, and so forth -- slim-profile, non-polluting wind turbines don't seem so bad...."

Cell-phone towers are not especially scenic but they are not 400 ft tall and they do provide some direct benefits to Highland residents. I will take my chances on a utility wanting to locate a conventional power plant in an area with no coal or oil and little cooling water available.

"the estimated \$150,000-\$200,000 in tax revenue generated from the sale of electricity could help everyone."

There is no local tax revenue from the power sale. Tax revenue, if any, would come from the local property tax. Make that \$0 to \$250,000 for the first year and the higher figure, if achieved, would decline rapidly as the turbines are depreciated. Virginia has not yet ruled on this but other states have often denied localities the right to tax these structures at all.

"According to our [badly researched and shortsighted] report in Friday's edition, however, county residents oppose the idea, rallying behind a steady cry of 'not in my backyard.' "

It is offensive that you fob off opponents as a bunch of nimbys without doing any research into the issues. That research could be as simple as reading the in-depth coverage provided by our local weekly paper, The Recorder.

"The turbines, of course, would not literally be in anyone's backyard, as they must be located along the unpopulated, wind-scoured peaks...."

Lightly populated indeed but not unpopulated. The impact on these few residents could be extreme and, in at least one case, might be catastrophic. It is unlikely that people will pay good money to stay at a mountain-top retreat if it becomes part of an industrial zone.

It is unseemly that you would take an editorial position on an issue of primary importance to this county without delving into it sufficiently to find out what all the fuss is about.

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