

Battle brews over Pendleton wind project

Group to confront commission on transmission line deal

By Jim Balow
Staff writer

Some Pendleton County residents are gearing up to fight a proposed \$100 million wind energy project to be built on Jack Mountain, about 10 miles south of Franklin in Pendleton County. A new group called Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County plans to meet at 7 p.m. tonight in the Franklin Ruritan building, said Robbie Sites, the group's founder.

Sites said he and others also plan to confront county commissioners this morning about an agreement the commissioners signed Nov. 16 with project developers Liberty Gap Wind Force LLC, a subsidiary of US Wind Force LLC of Pennsylvania. "It's been sprung on us," Sites said of the agreement. "The County Commission signed it without anyone's knowledge. The county is taking private property and giving it to another private entity. The implications are very very significant."

The agreement says the commission will acquire easements needed from private landowners for a 138-kilovolt transmission line, or T-line, needed to connect the project's electricity-generating turbines to the Allegheny Power System's North Franklin Substation. If landowners don't accept the commission's offer for the easements, the commission "will exercise its right of eminent domain" to acquire them, the agreement says.

Another document, the company's Nov. 18 application to the state Public Service Commission for a siting certificate, gives more details. It says the T-line will stretch nine miles overhead from Jack Mountain to the substation and will require a 100-foot-wide easement. It does not say how many properties it will cross.

Liberty Gap Wind Force hopes to build up to 50 wind turbines, each up to 413 feet tall, along a ridgetop just east of the South Branch of the Potomac River. The total generating capacity is between 70 and 100 megawatts. The project would provide up to 200 jobs during the peak six-month construction season next year and five to 12 permanent jobs.

The 5,000-acre site is owned by three parties. By far the largest owner is Allegheny Wood Products. Its president, John W. Crites, signed a lease for 4,673 acres on Feb. 1, 2002.

Company spokesman Jim Cookman listed several benefits of the project: "It's going to bring in significant tax revenues and revenues beyond tax revenues. We're estimating \$160,000 a year in taxes and an undisclosed amount in addition. It will create a small number of permanent jobs. It will create a significant number of spinoff business, like snow removal, blade washing. And tourism, I think if you talk to the people of Tucker County, they'll tell you people come to look at the wind towers there."

Cookman said the transmission line will cross 20 pieces of private property, depending on the final route chosen. He said the company sought the County Commission's help in obtaining easements for two reasons – the time crunch to get the project completed and the county could "express the benefits to landowners

probably in a clearer fashion." He declined to say how much the company will pay Allegheny Wood Products through its lease.

US Wind Force is in negotiations and plans to sell the project, but Cookman could not say to whom. "We clearly won't ultimately own the project. It would be someone who has a large tax liability, a Fortune 500 company, a public utility."

To qualify for federal tax credits needed to make the project work economically, the turbines must be up and spinning by the end of 2005, the PSC application says. To meet that deadline, the company asked the PSC for expedited consideration so it can get its permit no later than March 1, 2005. A PSC lawyer said the commission has not yet ruled on the company's request for quick treatment. Under normal rules, it must decide on the permit by next fall, the lawyer said.

The PSC, meanwhile, is considering a request by environmental groups to impose a moratorium on construction of new wind projects until the federal Government Accountability Office finishes a study. Reps. Alan Mollohan and Nick Rahall, both D-WV, asked the GAO to see whether voluntary U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service guidelines for building wind turbines adequately protect migratory birds.

Mollohan said Monday he wasn't familiar with the new project, but raised a few questions. Among them: "Is this a replication of the colonial model that has resulted in the exploitation of our natural resources, enriching a lot of out-of-state interests and leaving West Virginia with considerable liabilities?"

"We need to have serious debate and set sound criteria for the siting of wind turbines," he said. One wind farm has been built in West Virginia and two more received PSC permits several years ago.

The 44 turbines at the Mountaineer Wind Energy Center on Backbone Mountain in Tucker County went into operation in late 2002. Since then, scientists found the turbines are killing thousands of bats each year – the largest known bat kill worldwide.

Two proposed projects near Mount Storm – 166 turbines by NedPower LLC and up to 200 by Mount Storm Wind Force – have been on the back burner but presumably are active once more after Congress renewed the wind generation tax credits in October. Mount Storm's parent is the same as the Liberty Gap's.

Cookman said US Wind Force hopes to build the Mount Storm project by the end of 2005. At least one environmental group – the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy – and one private citizen – former Highlands Conservancy President Frank Young – have asked to intervene in the Pendleton case.

"My biggest concern is what has developed, particularly on Backbone Mountain, with the effect on bats," Young said. "If all those turbines were constructed that are already permitted, we'd be looking at upwards of 40,000 bat deaths a year. That's a tremendous number. I think the PSC and the DNR [Department of Natural Resources] need to look at that and no more permits should be issued until we get that number brought down."

Peter Shoenfeld, head of the conservancy's wind committee and a Pendleton County landowner, said he's leaning toward Young's position. He attended another meeting of area residents last week. "I'm putting the word out to other properties in the area," Shoenfeld said. "I'm alarmed." Although the conservancy has not yet taken a formal position on the Pendleton project, intervenor status in the case will give the group a chance to be a formal participant in the PSC proceedings.

Larry Thomas, a retired accountant from the Washington area, said he and his wife moved to Circleville several years ago. He's developing land – subdividing property and building cabins as vacation homes.

"One of the things we like about this area is it's so pristine. This is one of the prettiest counties in the state. Something like this will cause an eyesore and not have the benefit like in other parts of the country."

He said Monday he first found out about the scope of the project when he read the local paper last week. Though the transmission line doesn't cross his property, "I'm not in agreement with the county being able to take property and sell it to a private company, for whatever reason," he said.

"My wife and I feel this had to start more than a year ago. This should have been brought to the vote of the people. Anything of this magnitude ought to be brought before the public." Instead, he thinks the County Commission acted secretly. "I think there were very few people that were informed about what they were doing."

Thomas predicted four types of people will show up at the County Commission meeting this morning – "People like me and Kay who don't want this at all, people adverse to the way this was handled, people who don't want these in their viewshed, who want to sit on their decks and not see them, and the conservationists.

"I see a lot of concern and anger in the county I'd prefer not to see," he said. "It's just growing every day."

County Commission President Kelly Hartman did not immediately return a call from the Gazette on Monday.

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