

Power belongs to the people

Is industrial scale wind power generation right for Highland County? As the clock ticks down on the most important decision our county has ever faced, residents are still without sufficient information to unambiguously answer that question. Disturbingly, county officials don't seem concerned that they have to vote on this issue within a few months without a full understanding of the potential consequences of their action.

Last week, Highland's planners and supervisors got some very good advice from their county attorney and from the one planner who clearly recognizes the need for more time to fully comprehend what the proposed wind project at Red Oak Knob could mean for Highland's 2,500 residents.

Attorney Melissa Dowd urged our three supervisors to meet the issue head on by issuing a clear statement defining just what the county will allow in the way of wind power generation here as a matter of policy and, by implication, why. That would be fair to those with an interest in such development and would provide a baseline by which residents could gauge the intent of their leadership — of which, currently, there is no clue. She cited the comprehensive plan, which places a premium on environmental integrity, as a good place to start.

Planning commission member Lisa Kodger, who has taken her job very seriously from the time she joined those ranks a few months ago, gave supervisors and her own commission an alternative they could use to open up sufficient time to do their homework. She pointed out if supervisors denied Highland New Wind Development's request for a permit now, the developer could not submit a new request for 12 months. And from all that's known and not known today, it will take all of a year to do this right. Whatever hardship that might incur for HNWD, it's nothing to the long-term hardship the county might endure from an uninformed decision.

But beyond a deeper understanding of the technology, finances and environmental issues surrounding wind power, supervisors need an accurate evaluation of what the people they represent want or don't want in the way of this kind of project. Decisions around here are too often supported by anecdotal feedback of the kind that led to this week's demise of the magnificent spruce trees that fronted our courthouse. In that case, an informal query of courthouse personnel found a general ambivalence that was cited as reason enough to vote for removal. Never mind that written support for the trees — solicited by the board — was 35-8 against cutting them down. The sheer arrogance revealed by this decision is appalling. That it might play a role in wind power decisions is frightening.

There is a much better way to register public sentiment. If ever there was a need for a county-wide, state-endorsed referendum, this is it. It's not an easy thing to do and there is some cost attached, but the county could call for a special election based

on a sufficient number of local signatures and an endorsement by supervisors. Having access to a clear majority opinion is the only way people on the minority side of the vote will be able to accept it as just.

As a result of the eventual decision on wind power, Highland will follow one of two very different roads into the future. Which road that is should be the certified choice of a majority of residents. This is far too important to be left to word of mouth, petitions, or sentiments drawn from public hearings that are not always representative of the broader view. If these methods were accurate, county leaders could only conclude now, from hundreds of petition signatures, dozens of letters and overwhelming opposition at public meetings, that Highlanders want nothing to do with wind power here.

There is another disturbing undercurrent in the debate. Historically, supervisors have looked at growth of almost any kind as good for this county. As we are discovering, that simply isn't good policy. It's one thing for big city media to portray Highland as a rustic backwater where people struggle desperately to fend off poverty and make a living. It is quite another for county leadership to insinuate we are underprivileged. As the cry goes out for more jobs, it should be noted we enjoy one of the lowest (1.4 percent) unemployment rates in the state. Poverty in any real sense of the word is virtually unknown in Highland. While average household incomes are modest, there is a great deal of equity in home ownership. A proliferation of wind turbines would neither create significant permanent jobs nor add much revenue to the county treasury. And what might be added could negatively affect our composite index rating, canceling out any gain. It's been suggested that if the wind plant resulted in tax revenue for the county, that income could somehow offset current property tax increases. Again, there is no evidence Highland would realize any revenue; in fact, most other localities are seeing what they hoped to gain disappear with state legislative changes. Our schools could always use more money, but thanks to a strong effort by supervisors and the community as a whole, they've already gotten a \$300,000 annual increase from the state in recognition of our small scale economics that will kick in next year.

If county leaders have any inclination to sell out our natural heritage to an unproven and unstable industrial technology, it should only be after all the facts make a case for such a decision and the majority of citizens understand them well enough to support it. Currently, neither is the case.

The county is looking for informed leadership. Allow sufficient time to provide it. Let the people have their say.

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