

Numbers can't be ignored

As the date approaches for a decision, it seems impossible supervisors could ignore the groundswell of public opinion here in opposition to bringing industrial-scale wind energy to Virginia's most rural county.

More than 1,000 individuals, representing more than 60 percent of Highland households, stand publicly in opposition to what would be the state's first such facility in Virginia. Given the county's population of only 2,500, many under voting age, that's a remarkable number. And it stands in stark contrast to only four individuals who have offered written support of the plan. While we're certain there are more who support the idea of installing 20-some, 400-foot turbines here, it's tough to find them.

Supervisors declined a formal referendum on this question to take the pulse of the community. But they have assured the handful of citizens collecting signatures that their petitions will be given due weight and consideration. To do otherwise at this point would be disastrous — a slap in the face to more than 600 residents and 400 people who own property here and contribute their fair share to the county's tax base.

All three board members have said representing the wishes of their constituency is a top priority, and promised as much prior to their election a year ago. But many opposing the commercial wind project believe supervisors have already made up their minds, and will push the proposal through on the grounds they were elected to do what's best for the county. We find it hard to believe, however, they would show such utter disregard to this large majority who trust them to do what they consider the right thing.

Even large-scale wind energy developers like Community Energy and U.S. Wind Force have stated strongly that it's important for communities to welcome such facilities, and their interest in erecting turbines wanes considerably in places where public sentiment does not support their plans. Surely our own supervisors would show the same respect

to their friends and neighbors who elected them to represent their interests. We want to believe they would hold public opinion in far higher regard than corporations with so much to gain financially and so little to give in return.

Supervisor Jerry Rexrode has said he has spoken to many residents about the issue, and found that for each person who has voiced opposition, there is another who supports HNWD's project. It's time for him to come out of the closet with those names. If he votes in favor of the project on the basis of a mysterious, unverifiable list of supporters while discounting those willing to stand up for their beliefs, it will mark a sad day in local governance. At a minimum, he needs to encourage those folks to put their support into the public record.

By the time this decision comes up for a vote early next year, the numbers will most likely be even more compelling in supporting the reality that the majority of taxpayers who support this county are not prepared to accept this project and others like it that would probably follow. They do not believe Highland should be the first in the state to welcome a "wind farm," and they are not convinced any amount of potential tax revenue is worth being Virginia's guinea pig.

County supervisors can honorably show they represent their constituency, not their own interests or egos, by voting down HNWD's requests for the time being, and putting a moratorium on further requests until people here might be ready to welcome wind energy developers. Years from now, if the technology is proven and the tax revenue certain, perhaps Highlanders will change their minds. We doubt that will happen anytime soon, though. Residents of all backgrounds and persuasions care deeply about this county and are determined to protect its heritage and stunning scenic beauty from any kind of development which threatens one of the last, best places to live in this country.

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