

Pendleton wind opponents rally the troops

BY WILL O'CONNOR
• STAFF WRITER

FRANKLIN, W.Va. — “We all share one thing here tonight. We are all concerned,” said Pendleton County property owner Robbie Sites to a group of 77 Pendleton residents and property owners gathered at the Franklin Ruritan building Tuesday night.

The meeting took place after the public proceedings of the Pendleton County Commission and marked the inaugural public gathering of a newly formed group called Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County. The group was organized a little over a week ago by five Pendleton residents and property owners who were concerned over recent news that the Pendleton commission had agreed in a contract with U.S. Wind Force to acquire all easements necessary to run a transmission line from a proposed wind farm on the southern end of Pendleton to the Allegheny Power substation in Franklin.

“When I heard about this, my first reaction was, I can’t believe they (the county commission) did this,” said Larry Thomas, a founding member of FBPC. “It was amazing how little research the commission had done. They got everything from the developers.” Thomas said the purpose of FBPC was to start asking questions, hear the concerns of the people of Pendleton, and to try and find answers. “We want all sides represented,” said Sites, another founding member. “In our opinion this is something the commission should have done in the beginning. There are too many unanswered questions.”

Giving a summary of the commission meeting, Zelene Harmon of Franklin said, “Now the commission is on notice that people in Pendleton do not take condemnation of their property lightly.”

Mike Roberts of Moyers said many things about the contract and proposed development concerned him, but what made him most upset was the secret nature of the commission’s decision. Roberts asked why the people were not given the opportunity to voice their opinion, and said on such short notice, he was encouraged and surprised by how good peoples’ presentations had been earlier that day.

“I’ve been in public service for 20 years, and this is not how it should be done,” said

former director of the Pocahontas County Tourism Commission Gail Price.

Sites said the commission was asked what it would do with the information and feedback it had received. The commission announced it would consult the county attorney about reviewing the contract. Sites invited commission members to the FBPC meeting, but commissioner Bob Grimm said the county attorney advised them not to attend. Grimm also said the attorney was going to contact USWF’s lawyer to discuss the opposition.

One resident wanted to know how extensive the upgrades to Allegheny Power’s substation in northern Franklin would be. People responded that Allegheny Power was required to accept the new transmission lines and would spend around \$1 million in upgrades to do so. Many suspected Allegheny Power would pass the expense of the upgrades on to its customers. Thomas agreed the group needed to talk to Allegheny Power.

Sites said USWF was trying to pit neighbor against neighbor with a divide and conquer strategy in order to gain the easements. The reason USWF hasn’t produced any maps or been specific as to where the lines will run is because it’s trying to find the path of least resistance, he said. Sites said there was a lot of money at stake for USWF and warned it would use several tactics to get its way. “The key is that we stay together.”

The group also addressed other topics:

- Eve Firor presented web sites where they could learn more about wind power, and encouraged people to write to state representatives in opposition to the project.

- Price asked whether the company was obligated to take down the towers once they become obsolete. She had heard that turbines were cheaper to construct than maintain, and worried the company would abandon them once they are no longer profitable. Thomas replied the issue was not laid out in the contract.

- Price had done research on turbines’ effect on tourism, and thinks Liberty Gap will not significantly help or harm tourism in the county. It will, in her estimation, be detrimental to the county’s viewshed.

- An attendee said the commission had failed to post the minutes of its meetings on the county web site and had not responded to

e-mails since January.

- Under recent West Virginia law, for tax purposes the \$180 million investment USWF makes will be assessed at salvage value or 5 percent, rather than the 60 percent most businesses pay.

- The water line to Sandy Ridge could cost as much as \$800,000. If the county does not construct the water line, then USWF is not obligated to pay \$450,000 to the county.

- According to Linda Cooper of Citizens for Responsible Wind Power, the Backbone Mountain wind project in Tucker County, W.Va. promised 200 local jobs during the construction phase — two were realized — and of the 10-12 permanent jobs promised, only three were realized. USWF has claimed 200 local jobs will be created during construction of Liberty Gap.

- The transmission lines will run along 68-foot wooden electric poles.

- FBPC will meet again Monday, Dec. 13 at 7 p.m. in the high school auditorium in Franklin. FBPC plans to invite as many speakers on the subject as possible including: USWF, Allegheny Power, and the county commission.

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