

Citizens' group forms to protect, enhance county

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — As the wind energy issue comes to a head this week, some of those opposing the project have taken steps to form an organization called “Highlanders for Responsible Development.” Though stemming from those who have been gathering weekly to discuss the potential effects of wind turbine projects in Highland, its members intend to be a volunteer group of citizens the county can use to help gather objective information on any issue.

Though still loosely formed and in its initial organizational stages, interim spokesperson Charlotte Stephenson characterized those involved as “citizens who have come together to provide proactive assistance to the community, to benefit ongoing projects the county is considering or undertaking.”

For weeks, Highland residents and landowners opposed to Highland New Wind Development’s plans for a wind facility on Allegheny Mountain have been sharing information about wind energy in general, and how it might affect Highland’s future. Eventually, Stephenson said, the core group of roughly 55 people agreed they needed to form a type of non-profit entity, and offer to assist county leaders in a way that could provide information, research or whatever they might need as

Highland develops.

“It’s been educational for all of us,” she said. “We’re attempting to do something that’s never been done before in Highland County.” The group has drafted a mission statement to define its purpose, though Stephenson cautioned it could change over time. The draft states, “Our mission is to protect and enhance Highland County’s natural and cultural heritage.”

While the issue of wind energy development got the ball rolling, Stephenson says this group will have a much broader purpose. “We want to work with the supervisors, to be an avenue for them. We want to offer every area of our expertise. It would be a volunteer system for them to call on for any issue ... I do not mean at all to say we do not have faith in what they’re doing. It’s just that things in Highland County were simple, unencumbered up until now. Things have gotten much more complicated, and if there is ever a time (supervisors) needed help, this is the time.”

The group will make itself available for “anything the county encounters,” not just land use issues, Stephenson said. “We’ll work as a subcommittee or committee for the supervisors, whatever can be most useful ... We’re interested in assisting them. The supervisors could use us in many, many ways.”

Though Stephenson says the group’s goals are still evolving, they include ensuring that local decisions are made “by and for the benefit of Highland County residents.”

Highlanders for Responsible Development hopes to provide information on land use and economic development issues; maintain public trust, property values and quality of life by adhering to the comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance; and promote long-term stability in the county through carefully developing its values and resources.

Its draft statement concludes, “We believe that change, while inevitable, can take place in a way consistent with the intrinsic value of Highland’s rural character.”

The group is open to anyone, Stephenson stressed. “We are all Highlanders. And we are all here for the same reasons. My family has been here for six generations, and some have only been here a week. It doesn’t matter. It makes no difference whether you’re here a day or 200 years.”

Stephenson says the interim group will finalize details, and provide more specific information next week. Highlanders for Responsible Development will meet at 6 p.m. Monday, at The Highland Center in Monterey. All are welcome to attend.

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