

Getting to the heart of it

As planners deliberate individually this week on whether Highland New Wind Development's proposed utility is the right project in the right place, they are likely to find the county's comprehensive plan offers very few statements with a definitive interpretation. But a thorough re-reading of Highland's comprehensive plan — the document guiding all planning and zoning decisions here — leaves little doubt about what residents want Highland to look like far into the future.

By state law, comprehensive plans "shall be made with the purpose of guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development of the territory which will, in accordance with the present and probable future needs and resources, best promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants."

Highland's plan explains its document should be general in nature, but should "forecast and prepare the community for future changes, such as changes in population size, employment base, environmental quality, and the demand for public services and utilities ... Effective planning is a dynamic process, one that both considers and attempts to coordinate many local and regional variables at one time. It is best carried out by the people of the community."

In preparing and adopting the current plan, 1999-2004, Highland citizens, in spite of varying degrees of priority, agreed on four key themes: Educational quality, economic opportunity, social well being, and land use/environmental balance.

Our planning commission must now review HNWD's wind generating utility and decide whether it is "substantially in accordance" with our comprehensive plan. State code requires such a review in cases where certain facilities are being considered, including utilities such as the one proposed by this developer. This means planners must decide whether the general location, character and extent of the project are largely in harmony with that area in westernmost Highland atop Allegheny Mountain, on one of the highest ridges within our borders.

One of the biggest challenges for planners is that nothing in the plan comes close to describing the kind of project being proposed. If built, it would be the first of its kind in the state. The plan outlines pages of recommendations and goals, but few seem relevant to erecting 400-foot industrial wind towers. Former planning commission members who were seated when the plan was adopted several years ago say no such project was envisioned at the time. That leaves much room for subjective interpretation as to the plan's language, a situation made evident by how county officials supporting the project have come to their conclusions.

For example, building official Jim Whitelaw, in his report on the review for the commission, lists the project as in conformance with the plan under one of the county's economic goals: "Ensure that new business and industrial development occurs in suitable locations and is compatible with the county's environmental, scenic and rural character."

Yet hundreds of residents opposed to the project see it as clearly not compatible with its chosen site. They list the potential damage to a sensitive and endangered wildlife habitat, and point to the vastly

out-of-scale size of the towers as severely degrading scenic and rural character.

We'll be the first to admit, after a line-by-line examination of the comprehensive plan, there is much language that can be interpreted either way and a great deal depends on how one wants their opinions to fit a certain mold. Planners certainly have their work cut out for them.

That said, its overall goals and recommendations appear to only remotely support the notion this utility would be *substantially* in accordance with the plan. To the average person, much about the project seems wildly out of sync with county goals as they're outlined, even in vague language. There are about five clear goals or recommendations that come close to supporting the project's character and general location, like the fact that it's already near an existing transmission line. There are about twice that many comprehensive plan statements that would not seem to support the project's compatibility. But there are another four or five statements that could be interpreted either way, depending on what one believes about the developer's claims. These will be the most difficult for planners to judge.

Most of the plan's goals, though, don't seem to have a bearing either way. Many address issues like social services, proper housing, and improved education; or they simply don't appear to be relevant, such as how mobile home development should be guided in certain districts.

Nevertheless, the overarching goals are clearly geared toward improving the quality of life here, economically and educationally, but never at the expense of our environment and scenic rural character.

Project supporters, and developer Mac McBride himself say, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and these towers are just as visually interesting to some people as they are repulsive to others.

Much of man's creations are indeed beautiful, but it seems quite a stretch to compare hundreds of tons of steel with a 20-year life-span to the delicate, naturally balanced environment that blesses these mountains. Hard to say such a short-lived power company project is in character with that which has taken millions of years and the hand of God to create here.

Much of the comprehensive plan speaks strongly to our citizens' interest in preserving that environment. On that point, planners would find it more than a little difficult to determine this project largely conforms to that goal. That alone is reason enough to vote no in good conscience.

Whatever position they take, commission chair Jim Cobb has required each member to publicly explain their stance prior to making a motion. We applaud that position. Official transparency has been hard to come by in the course of this critically important debate.