



Pictorial

It remains too difficult to tell whether the State Corporation Commission will approve a certificate for Highland New Wind Development to construct Virginia's first wind utility here. Testimony on both sides of the issue this week was expert, and with so much information to digest, SCC's commissioners will certainly have their work cut out for them. One thing is apparent, however: Their judgment in this case requires a reasonable belief beyond the agency's narrow definition. HNWD's proposal simply does not neatly fit anything delineated by the state thus far. Highland's supervisors had the same problem. In addition, the multi-faceted implications in this case are enormously complex. It's not just about birds and bats, or scenery, or setting precedents for future renewable energy. It's most clearly about money. Blue Grass resident John Simmons told the SCC Wednesday, "I suspect this is a done deal." There are hundreds of heavy hearts in Highland that will agree with him, that despite all the citizens who have stated so clearly everything that's wrong and suspect in this proposal, the majority of the people who live here are going to also soon be living with these monstrosities in their midst. "I think this is poor judgment, and I think it's a mistake," Simmons said. The state agencies reviewing environmental impacts have concluded there stands to be a serious one from these 400-foot towers and their rotating blades. One witness for the SCC noted this case is different from others — it's not like a landfill that everyone hates, he said. No. It's worse. The SCC cannot prevent other companies from quickly following HNWD if this project is approved. The SCC must understand what so many here know all too well — the project never received a thorough review at the local level. It was a "done deal" here long before our supervisors had reviewed a county application. Conditions attached to a state certificate, if granted, should be many. No, HNWD argues, it isn't fair to "punish" this small company with extra expenses and time spent on further assessment just because it's the first one to walk down this road. Wrong. That's exactly why it should be held to the highest of standards. HNWD maintains if a wind utility can't be built here, then there's nowhere in Virginia they can be developed. Wrong again. There are few places more ecologically and culturally sensitive than Highland County. If it can be built here, it can be built anywhere. Above, SCC examiner Alexander Skirpan overlooks the proceedings. (Recorder photo by Will O'Connor)

