

Ordinance prohibits "tall structures"

Supervisors say 60-day measure gives time to study wind turbines

By Nancy Lindsey

The Patrick County Board of Supervisors voted 3-2 Monday to pass an emergency ordinance prohibiting the construction of structures above 100 feet in Patrick County--a measure aimed at controlling the possible development of 400-foot-high wind turbines on the county's ridges.

The ordinance, which is only in effect for 60 days, designates the entire area of Patrick County as a "tall structure zoning district" and exempts telecommunication structures such as cell phone towers.

County Administrator Regena Handy issued a press release last week confirming that the board has been approached by a company interested in building wind farms in Patrick County, but is not in negotiation with the company.

There have been reports that the unidentified company has contacted landowners in the Belcher Mountain area of Meadows of Dan and the Bull Mountain area of Patrick Springs about leasing land for wind farms.

"I don't think it's going to be in the best interests of the county," Mayo River District Supervisor Danny Foley said of the wind farm proposal. "We need to pass an ordinance to slow the process down to where somebody can't just come in and do it."

Foley made the motion to pass the 60-day ordinance, saying it would give the board time to research the issue and get comments from the public.

"We've got to have a lot more information and know what we're talking about," said Blue Ridge District Supervisor Roger Martin.

County Attorney Eric Monday said Patrick County has no zoning laws and thus no protection against any kind of development. "The current state of the law--or the lack of it--says there's nothing this board could do," Monday said. A company wanting to build wind turbines would only have to buy a building permit and start building, he said.

The ordinance should be advertised for public hearing and could be adopted as a regular, permanent ordinance, Monday said.

"I want people's input and this gives people a chance to know what's going on," Mayo River District Supervisor Crystal Harris said.

Dan River District Supervisor Jonathan Large said he was concerned that the wind turbine company has not "come back to this board and answered some of these questions."

"I'd like to see some good, full discussion before we go off half-cocked," Martin said.

Foley, Harris and Large eventually voted in favor of the ordinance, with Martin and Peters Creek District Supervisor David Young voting against it.

In the meantime, Martin and Young offered three amendments to Foley's motion.

Young made motions amending the ordinance to include, not exempt, cell phone towers and to direct the Patrick County Planning Commission to start work on a comprehensive land use plan. Martin made the motion to make the ordinance "part and parcel of a countywide zoning plan."

All three amendments were voted down by Foley, Harris and Large, who said they wanted the 60-day ordinance to be passed without revisions.

Michael Burnette, assistant county administrator, said he had recently visited an area of West Virginia where wind turbines have been constructed. Local government officials there reported no negative effects on real estate values or tourism, but were disappointed with the tax revenues they were getting, he said.

Burnette said he was told by residents that they couldn't hear the noise of the wind turbines beyond 32 to 40 yards. Burnette recommended the supervisors visit a windmill farm during the next two months to see for themselves "the good and bad aspects."

"The company will tell you it's the best thing that ever happened, and opposing groups will say it's the worst thing that ever happened," Burnette said.

"I have a problem with any piecemeal attack," Young said, reminding the other supervisors that they recently held a retreat to discuss the need for comprehensive, long-term planning.

"We need the planning commission looking at long-range planning," Young said. "We don't need individual circumstances driving the zoning laws in this county."

After a recess, Young made the motion to ask the planning commission to start work on a comprehensive land use plan "as soon as possible." The motion passed unanimously.