

Pendleton citizens force end to wind contract

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• STAFF WRITER

FRANKLIN, W.Va. — “You’re up against a huge juggernaut of money and power,” said Dan Boone, a wildlife biologist, to about 75 people at the Pendleton County High School auditorium Monday. “But Pendleton is way out in front of the curve in terms of organization.”

Boone, who has been deeply involved in studying the structure and consequences of all aspects of wind energy over the past two years, was by invitation addressing those who attended a gathering sponsored by “Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County,” a grassroots group recently formed in reaction to Pendleton’s relationship with U.S. Wind Force of Delaware.

Due to strong, adverse reactions from Pendleton County citizens, the contract between U.S. Wind Force and county commissioners to secure right of way for a transmission line was promptly terminated last week.

Pendleton officials had agreed to be responsible for securing easements on private property to make way for a 139-kilovolt transmission line serving a \$100 million, 100-megawatt wind generating utility planned by U.S. Wind Force’s subsidiary, Liberty Gap. Pendleton citizens were not told about the contract publicly, however, and when they found out after it was signed, they came before their commissioners protesting vehemently. They were especially outraged county officials had agreed to use powers of eminent domain if necessary to secure easements across private property.

While wind utilities are planned across the state, this is the first one selected for Highland County’s neighbor to the north. Plans call for 50 turbines stretched over several miles of Jack Mountain ridge, and a five-mile transmission line carrying power from the turbines to a substation north of Franklin. Turbines would be constructed right up to the Highland County border near Doe Hill, and at 400 feet in height, will be seen by some Highland residents in that area.

Boone said he was impressed by the turnout Monday night, and had never seen a group organize and gain so much support so quickly. “If this level of concern could be focused on the public service commission (the state agency that will approve or deny the project) it could be very effective.”

As for U.S. Wind Force’s original contract with Pendleton officials to secure the easements, Boone said it was the first time he’d heard of a wind developer or locality agreeing to use the power of eminent domain. “These guys have set a new standard, and it’s not a very high standard. There have been a lot of wind developers, but none has tried to

pull a fast one quite like this one here has,” he said.

Organizer Robbie Sites, one of several landowners whose property could be crossed by the transmission line, told those attending that his group intends to gather information from all sides of the issue. Representatives from U.S. Wind Force and county commissioners had been invited to the meeting but declined to attend. “Our goal is to have all views represented,” he said.

Boone was one of five guest speakers at the second public meeting of the group. He was invited to speak because he has researched and fought wind development in West Virginia and Maryland for two years. Boone told Pendleton citizens there is a lot to lose. “They (the wind developers) want to take away your quality of life, your heritage,” he said. “They will transform our culture and our vistas into industrial complexes.” Like many of the speakers that night, Boone said he was a big supporter of renewable energy, but didn’t think wind facilities were appropriate in the Alleghenies. “We need the willpower to develop it wisely,” he said.

According to Boone, if all possible sites for wind power were developed in the mid-Atlantic, the power generated could not keep up with the country’s rising demand for energy, and the central plains states had the potential to produce 20 times more wind energy than the Mid-Atlantic.

Economics is the driving force behind the projects, he explained. As much as two-thirds of the money invested in wind projects is exempt from taxation in some states. “That’s a cost borne by you and me,” he said. And now, several states mandate that a certain percentage of their power must come from renewable sources, so utilities pay big money for wind power. “There’s huge pressure to build these facilities. They’re coming ... and their size is mirrored by the scale of the economic pressure behind them. It’s about money and power.”

Boone said turbines present a threat to wildlife, especially bats. One site with 40 turbines killed 4,000 bats and birds in a year, he said, explaining that despite their reputation, bats are a vital part of the ecology.

Gail Price, director of sales at Snowshoe Mountain Resort, urged citizens of Pendleton to plan for the future. She said tourism could do a lot to help the county’s economic base and encourage entrepreneurship. Price has years of experience in tourism, having previously served as the executive director of the Pocahontas County Tourism Commission and the Highland County Chamber of Commerce.

The county had much to offer visitors, said Price, and even a slight increase in tourism could go a long way in a small county like Pendleton. After talking to people in Tucker

County, where a wind plant currently operates, Price said she believed turbines are not a tourist attraction. “They’re a curiosity,” she said, and most people don’t return to see them again.

Price told citizens, “Instead of letting things happen to us, let’s make things happen for us.”

“Don’t let the skunks in the door,” said speaker Mike Roberts of Moyers, referring to the developers he said stand to reap large economic gains by “raping” the county’s land.

Roberts said it was impossible to put a price tag on the beauty and tranquility of Pendleton, which could be destroyed by the turbines. Roberts said there were plans to build 150 to 200 more turbines in the county, and believed the developments would wreck property values and the “intangibles” that make the county special. Wind developers, he said, “have no consideration as to what’s important to humanity ... Nobody’s back yard is going to be safe from this rape.”

Speaker Don Steck, a retired environmental expert who owns property in Pendleton, said turbines would be more appropriate in the southern part of the state where significant damage has already been done to the landscape by the mining industry. Steck said Pendleton’s citizens should have the final say as to whether they wanted wind development. Citizens, he said, “are being forgotten by the county and the wind companies.” All the profits are going out of state, he said, proposing the Endangered Species Act or National Environmental Policy Act be used to slow or stop the project.

Highland County resident Tom Brody spoke about his ongoing experience with Highland New Wind Development’s proposed wind plant near his home and business on Allegheny Mountain. He explained he and his wife, Patti Reum, operate a retreat that promotes the mountains — their culture, values and environment — and that he feels that business is directly threatened by the Highland New Wind Development project. “Our property is within one mile of the proposed 40-megawatt wind plant. We’re part of the neighborhood there,” he said. “Our property rights are being jeopardized in Virginia.”

Brody told the group that at first, he didn’t realize the industrial scale of such facilities. “We had no idea how complicated this was. It involves a lot of money.”

While HNWD’s project can use an existing transmission line on the site to carry its power, Brody said, “We are concerned about the upgrade” that might be needed later.

He said the number of Highlanders opposed to the project planned there was growing. “We are not a minority and we don’t want to break up the community. We want to work together,” he said, stressing there was a lot in common among Highland and Pendleton residents involved in this issue.

Paulette Roberts told the crowd that she contacted Tucker County and found that of the \$150,000-\$250,000 the wind developers projected the site on Backbone Mountain to generate in county tax revenue, the county would only receive \$92,000 and had yet to be paid.

Rob Burns, Executive Director of the Tucker County Development Authority, confirmed with The Recorder Wednesday that the county had not yet seen any tax money from the project. "We are still negotiating. They (the wind developers) never promised a firm amount. They just showed projections... I am 100 percent confident that the county will receive more than \$92,000."

Backbone Mountain has been operating since December of 2002, and Burns attributed the delay in collection of taxes to being the "trail blazers" of wind energy in West Virginia and to not determining a specific and fair dollar amount early in the process.

Sites, concluding the meeting, told those attending he intended to fight the project due to what he saw as a breach in trust stemming from the Pendleton commissioners' contract with U.S. Wind Force. "I learned a lesson from Miss Waggy, my third-grade teacher, about telling the truth. Any time there's deception, secrecy, a seed has been planted as nothing good can come from it."

Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County will meet again in Franklin Monday, Jan. 10 at the high school auditorium. Sites encourages anyone with an interest in learning more about wind power to attend. Those opposing the project, he said, should write to the Public Service Commission. Sites told The Recorder Tuesday that the West Virginia PSC "needs to be aware that we, as a community, have not bought into this thing."

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