

Legislators cautious about wind development

BY ANNE ADAMS
• STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — While Highland County struggles with its decision on a proposed 50-megawatt wind generating facility, lawmakers at the state level are just beginning to gather information on wind energy, and how it may or may not develop in Virginia.

Virginia and West Virginia are the only two remaining mid-Atlantic states that have not yet put Renewable Portfolio Standards into effect. States like Pennsylvania and Maryland are mandating that utilities purchase as much as 18 percent of their power from “renewables” such as solar, biomass, and wind.

Those opposing wind energy development in this area of the country say those standards are one of the strong driving forces behind the proliferation of wind turbines, about 1,000 of which are either built or pending to serve northeastern power companies in 34 projects, selling that power at a premium because big utility companies are being forced to purchase that type of power to meet state standards.

Del. Chris Saxman, who represents Highland’s citizenry, says he’s still not up to speed on the pros and cons of wind energy in Virginia, and isn’t entirely sure it’s right for this state. He says legislation on siting regulations is expected to be introduced at the short session of Virginia’s General Assembly, which convenes next week. Saxman says while he isn’t sure of its sponsors, he expects it will address wind energy across Virginia.

“I’m not as informed on this,” he said Tuesday. “I’m not sure

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Del. Chris Saxman

how efficient it is, or how it adds to our power needs. Does it add enough to be worth it? I’m not sure yet.” Saxman says he’s been receiving a flood of information from many sources on the issue and hasn’t yet had time to digest it all. “Should wind energy be part of our mix? I really don’t know.”

Saxman has seen a wind utility in Palm Springs, Calif. “There are just rows and rows and rows of these turbines,” he said. “Do we want that here?”

Saxman believes the country, and Virginia, needs to look more forward on ways it can reduce its dependence on foreign sources. “Virginia needs to be prepared,” he said, referring to opening up development of natural gas. “That’s a clean energy source,” he said. “And it’s (federally) banned. It’s silly, given our supply needs. Does that dwarf the need for wind? We have to become energy self-sufficient, and think long-term.” Conservation efforts, he said, should be part of addressing the demand problem, though he notes people resist that idea because it requires a change in behavior.

On wind development in

Highland, he says, “I’m just not decided. I have some concerns.” One of those is that his constituents are concerned about the issue. And, he is concerned about the impact on the environment, especially how a wind facility might affect the beauty of Highland County, where he owns property. “I appreciate the county’s need for economic development,” he added.

Saxman has been researching tax revenue issues after receiving a request from Highland’s board of supervisors. “I’m looking at depreciation, and how it might affect revenue. And what happens if you accelerate depreciation, or offer exemptions?” Again Saxman points to natural gas as having a “large potential” in this state. “And it doesn’t disrupt the environment,” he adds.

Asked whether he believed the state could guarantee any potential tax revenue from wind projects here, Saxman laughed. “That’s one thing our state is not known for.”

He said there was no way any state lawmaker could guarantee a wind project here would add to county coffers for very long. “We

can’t tie the hands of future elected legislators or governors. We could offer nothing ironclad beyond two years. But it’s a very good question for your board to ask. The problem is, nothing is guaranteed.”

Last October, Sen. John Warner proposed a bill that would put a moratorium on off-shore wind projects in order to give Congress the opportunity to regulate such development, according to his spokesman John Ullyot.

Ullyot stated in December that though Warner is a longtime supporter of wind energy, the 1899 Rivers and Harbors Act “clearly was not designed with wind projects in mind and as such, fails to protect the interests of the environment and the taxpayer.”

Though the legislation did not pass, Ullyot says Warner plans to, at the earliest opportunity, “call a temporary ‘time out’ on wind-farm development” until protections can be put in place.

This week, Ullyot told The Recorder that Warner has not taken a position on Highland County’s proposed wind plant. Warner supports wind energy, “however, he knows there are some potential problems that need to be addressed to the general satisfaction of those most affected.”

Warner has heard from some of his constituents here, Ullyot said, and a group of Highlanders has requested a meeting with Warner or his staff to discuss this project. “Sen. Warner is very interested in hearing from his constituents about this project,” he said.

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