

# Leadership requires taking stand

In a county that has no four-lane highways or railroads running through it, no industrial park and a work force of less than 1,500 people, an Industrial Development Authority may seem superfluous. Only once before has industrial-scale development reared its head in Highland when some 15 years ago there was serious talk about constructing a major state prison.

Maybe that's why Highland's IDA seems a little unsure of itself in the face of the wind power controversy that currently grips the county. Maybe that's why it appears to want to duck the issue. Maybe there's another reason for the authority's hands-off position, but if so, it certainly isn't clear to us. As the debate swirls toward a conclusion, these seven men and women need to take a stand. They need to give county leaders an up or down on the suitability of 400-foot towers on Highland's ridge lines.

Monday's meeting of the IDA was in part an exercise in tortured logic. A request by the board of supervisors for the authority to examine the prospect of industrial-scale wind power generation proposed for Allegheny Mountain was turned on its head. Members expressed feelings of being unfairly put into the arena of public scrutiny and suggested it was not their job to offer advice on the matter — certainly not by a vote that would attach their names to one side or the other. "Why are we even here?" asked one member. "I think we should hand this right back to the board of supervisors." In the end, they seemed to be leaning toward turning in a list of the pros and the cons of the proposal and letting the supervisors take the heat by themselves.

The problem is, we already have a list of pros and cons. While there is certainly more information to be gathered, there is more than enough already on the table for people to carve out their positions and support them with facts. If the IDA can't take a position on industry, what exactly can it do?

Two IDA members have taken a position in favor of the project. Chairman David Smith and Olin Sponaugle say they support Highland New Wind's proposal to open the gates to wind power here. It's good they're willing to let their constituents know where they stand, but their reasons are troubling.

At Monday's meeting, Smith was in agreement with most of the arguments presented by opponents of the proposal. There is no way one could interpret his words to mean anything other than wind power would not be likely to benefit the county. But he supports it because, in his words, "We have to put the country ahead of our county and ahead of ourselves." Excuse us?

County leaders are appointed or elected to further the interests first and foremost of their constituents and we believe the people who put them in positions of authority feel the same way. To willingly sacrifice Highland's great long-term potential to reduce our nation's reliance on foreign oil relies on a false premise. Wind power from hundreds of turbines on all our ridges would make no difference in the national energy picture.

There is a place for wind power. A small county in windswept Kansas with no distinguishing natural features might welcome multiple "wind farms" as a perfect fit for its needs. Its population might embrace such a prospect and its leaders would do well to pay attention. Here, leaders appear to be leaning toward putting a round peg in a square hole despite a clear majority of strong opposition. No one in Highland benefits significantly except the developers and the few who would lease their land for such a purpose.

In this case, Smith, a very experienced man in matters of development, simply has it backward. The best interests of the nation are served only when the best interests of the communities that comprise the whole are first served.

Sponaugle's position is even more perplexing. "I'm for it because it's a new idea," he said, and added, "I'm even thinking about putting one in myself." We can think of a long list of new ideas that would be doomed to fail here and we hope that along with the newness, Sponaugle has good evidence in mind to go along with his support. And we're sure his neighbors in the vicinity of Snowy Mountain will be interested in his interest in wind development there. If the authority does decide to take a vote, Sponaugle needs to step aside on the grounds of an obvious conflict of interest.

Two very positive things did emerge from the meeting. The pros and cons of the proposal are very important and they got another thorough public airing in the course of the debate. As the conversation continues, the picture takes on clarity. The sense that the matter should be put to a countywide referendum supported by longtime IDA member Austin Shepherd would certainly gather momentum with the IDA's backing.

Supervisors were absolutely correct in asking the IDA to look thoroughly into the proposal and offer its best assessment of the facts. They should expect a majority opinion on the authority's findings to help them sort through their own positions. And before the final vote is taken, it remains essential to get an accurate read on where county residents fall on the matter by way of a referendum.

It's not that hard.