

Against all good reason

Against the advice of its industrial development authority, against the advice of its planning commission, and against the wishes of a clear majority of its constituents, our board of supervisors has taken another unilateral step down the road to offering Highland County up on a plate to an industry with the potential to obliterate its natural heritage and degrade its quality of life.

In the face of clear direction from people supervisors appointed to guide them, and those who elected them, the board's 2-1 vote to effectively remove height as an obstacle to development of any kind was as dismaying as it was astonishing. Perhaps most remarkable was supervisor Lee Blagg's explanation for his motion to alter the zoning laws after hearing three hours of almost unbroken opposition to change. "I believe in democracy where people's opinions count, but we're on a clock here," he told a packed courtroom. "I move to accept it (new zoning code) for the general welfare of the public. Whether it's good or bad zoning practice, I don't know."

What race against time are we in that making a bad decision is better than making no decision at all?

Well, that seems to be where we are. Two supervisors appear committed to granting Highland New Wind Development's permit for reasons they can't or won't explain. One appears content to sit on the fence, waiting to see how the wind will blow on the night when a vote is taken and the county's fate decided.

On the verge of arguably the most important decision ever to be made in Highland, the county needs better leadership than it's getting. To dismiss the advice of its planning commission and IDA and tacitly agree its board of zoning appeals isn't strong enough or knowledgeable enough to deal with so complex an issue is arrogant in the extreme. Supervisors seem fixated with the idea that because they've put a lot of time and research into this issue, their opinion is the only one that matters. Do they believe their advisory boards haven't been paying attention, or have no dog in the fight? Do they believe the dozens and dozens of citizens who have stood before them opposed to putting 400-foot towers on the county's ridge lines are uninformed?

It's past time that Jerry Rexrode, Robin Sullenberger and Blagg stand up and tell us what they know that makes keeping the prospect of degrading the quality of life here a viable position. They need to tell us why saying no to wind now, while there are so many questions to be answered, is a bad idea. If wind is a great idea, it will still be a great idea five years from now when its consequences will be much more clearly understood. If it's allowed now, and turns out to be a bad idea, the consequences will be devastating and irreversible.

One thing we do know. While HNWD's project on Red Oak Knob will be extremely profitable for its developers, it could very well ruin another family's livelihood. Bear Mountain Retreat, adjacent to Red Oak Ranch, offers a wilderness refuge and learning center for outdoor enthusiasts. Owned and run by Tom Brody and his wife, Patti Reum, it has been a solid Highland County business for many years. They have put their resources and hearts into creating this popular attraction — one that depends on its wild, unspoiled setting for success.

Does one man's right to do with his land as he pleases extend to infringing on the rights of his neighbors? Not unless his plans are overwhelmingly to the good of the general public. And in this case, quite the opposite is true. Yet the board appears willing to dismiss the concerns of a long-time resident with a successful business in favor of an absentee landowner with the wherewithal to tap into enormous government subsidies and develop property he doesn't live on. What's wrong with this picture?

In essence, the new zoning amendment will leave all conditional use applications solely in the hands of supervisors, to be decided on the merits as they see fit. Any and all projects, no matter how intrusive, can be considered. There are no boundaries — a landowner in Highland can have no assurance his property won't be adjoined by something utterly incompatible with the reasons he purchased it. The comprehensive land use plan now in the works will be irrelevant before it's complete.

Is this really how we want things run? Elected officials certainly have the right and obligation to make unpopular decisions based on their convictions. But those convictions need to be absolutely clear to those they govern, and based on the most solid of grounds. Neither is remotely in play at this point in this matter.