

# Red Oak tour no picnic

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Tuesday, the view from Allegheny Mountain was breathtaking. The sky was a brilliant, deep blue; wispy clouds began to frame the mountain tops toward the end of the afternoon. Visitors could see ridge after ridge of Highland County's stunning beauty for miles in all directions. Though it was the last day of summer, the leaves there had already begun to change, their deep, red and orange hues brightening the mountain sides well ahead of the rest of those in Highland that won't begin to show color for another couple of weeks.

There was not much new put on the table, but all concerned seemed to feel the tour was beneficial to the debate on whether wind power should be a part of the county's future. One new development, however, substantiated concerns the currently proposed utility project was only the beginning of industrial scale wind power in Highland. H.T. "Mac" McBride acknowledged his company, Highland New Wind Development, had leases from at least one other property owner in the county.

But the discussion on whether Highland should be a place for 400-foot industrial wind turbines took dramatic turns as county officials and Highland County landowners toured the sites for the proposed commercial wind facility. Despite calm pleasantries exchanged among visitors on both sides of the issue, there were impassioned pleas to officials. And ironically, the day was still with barely a breeze stirring even atop some of the highest places in Virginia's smallest county.

H.T. "Mac" McBride, his wife, Lola, and son, Tal, had invited members of the planning commission and board of supervisors to see exactly where he plans to install some 20 turbines on their 4,000-acre property, Red Oak Knob and Tamarack. Also extending invitations were adjoining landowners Pendleton and Leslie Goodall, and Tom Brody and Patti Reum, all of whom pleaded with officials to understand how they felt the electric facility would severely impact their livelihoods and a peaceful quality of life they'd cherished for 20 or more years on Allegheny.

More than 30 individuals interested in this debate took the tour as well, many of whom had never before seen the private properties at the center of the debate.

The entourage gathered at the entrance to Red Oak Ranch, the McBride family property,

and supervisors' chairman Robin Sullenberger officially called a meeting of his board, as did chairman David Johnston for the Highland County Planning Commission. All members of both boards were present.

## *The Goodall home*

A line of cars filed into the Goodall property, where Mr. Goodall explained the location of the McBrides' Tamarack property relative to his home. McBride's limited liability company, Highland New Wind Development, proposes to construct at least nine turbines on Tamarack, along a ridge directly across from the Goodalls' front porch.

Mr. Goodall told visitors that county attorney Melissa Dowd had mentioned using a computer simulation to determine if, indeed, the Goodalls would be able to see the turbines from their home. He led the way to his front yard, where Tamarack's ridge was the first rise in land from the Goodalls' property in front of the house.

Dowd had also questioned recently whether the Air Force was going to have an issue with turbines on Allegheny since it routinely conducts low-flying military training exercises along a route overhead.

Tuesday, as if on cue, a military jet screamed low along one of the ridges right overhead, startling the crowd shortly after they'd gathered about 3 p.m.

Mrs. Goodall insisted on a stance from county supervisors. She wanted them to first, admit the utility would impact her life and her property value, and secondly, to say they would apply the same standards when other wind energy projects are proposed in Highland closer to more populated areas.

She asked Mr. McBride and supervisors what kind of noise the turbines would produce, and how often. "How are you going to check the ambient noise here?" she said. "What do you hear right now?" Would the turbines run 24 hours a day, "while we're trying to sleep?" she asked.

The McBrides said no, the turbines won't turn 24 hours a day, but that yes, they can still turn at night; it depends on when the wind is blowing.

Mrs. Goodall pressed Sullenberger. "Will this impact my property?" she asked.

"I think it might," he replied.

"Can you say they will impact my life?" she asked supervisor Jerry Rexrode.

"They can if you let them," he replied.

Sullenberger admitted county officials simply didn't have all the answers to her questions yet.

And yet, Mrs. Goodall told supervisors, "You all will put these in anyway, not knowing. All this is unknown," she said.

"We've been given a proposal for us to look at," Sullenberger said, explaining again he couldn't really answer her questions.

Goodall said she will insist that if these turbines are allowed on the McBride property, in her view shed, then every other landowner in the county should be treated exactly the same way. "I just want the same respect as anyone living in town," she said. "I've been here 20 years. I'm involved, we've contributed in the community. I have lots of loans at the bank. We're members of the Mill Gap Ruritan Club. I just want you to say, yes, it's going to make a difference in my life."

She said she felt county officials didn't put much stock in how she, and other nearby landowners, felt because there were so few of them on Allegheny Mountain. "I just want to know that when they come put them in your backyard, you'll treat (everyone else) the same. I feel like you don't care about me.

"Tucker County (West Virginia) only gets 5 percent of what their towers are worth," she added. "You all who live elsewhere, think about that," she told the crowd. "You all know they're going to put them all over Highland County. You know that. If my sound and light is not important, then no one else's is."

Sullenberger said, "If you perceive it as a change, then I certainly have to admit that. I'm not trying to stop the discussion..."

"What about property values?" Goodall asked, saying she knew there were a lot of negatives involved in approving the project. "Give me a positive," she said.

"I don't know how I'm going to do that," Sullenberger said.

"Is this going to benefit me in any way?" Goodall said. "Who's going to buy my property (if the project is built)?"

"I will," said Lola McBride.

"Is that your answer, to buy me out?" Goodall replied.

Mrs. McBride said she would be willing to buy Goodall's property at fair market value.

"I don't want to leave," Goodall pleaded. "We just drilled a \$7,000 well."

Mr. McBride said, "Look, your house is no further away (from the turbines) than they are

from ours. I'm not going to do anything to hurt our property."

"I don't want to see them all over the whole county," Goodall concluded.

## **Tamarack**

The group drove to Tamarack, the first site on McBride's property, where at least nine turbines and a substation are proposed. From the cleared area, Lantz, Monterey, Jack, and Shenandoah mountains were seen miles away. Mr. Goodall noted that on a super-clear day, one could see as far as the Blue Ridge Mountains from that spot.

There, Mac McBride told visitors how he had come to pursue the commercial wind project idea. Four years ago, he said, he had installed anemometers to test the wind speed on his property. Data was collected every day for 30 days and interpreted by a meteorologist, who determined there were class 5 winds there. It takes three things to make this kind of project work, said McBride. "Wind, power lines, and pretty good roads." The power line crossing Tamarack continues over to Red Oak, the second site for a turbine grouping. And while "this is a very quiet day," McBride assured visitors, winds there can be very strong.

Supervisor Jerry Rexrode asked him whether any clear-cutting would be required; McBride said no trees would need to be cut for the project.

McBride explained that on the lower section of the Tamarack site, wind speed had not been tested, but if it were found to be good enough, turbines could be placed further along the ridge. "If there's good wind down there we'd want to put them there, but we don't know yet," he said.

Tal McBride said technology involved in commercial turbines keeps changing, and that could affect the number needed. A big change recently, he said, was the creation of a turbine with retractable blades that could be pulled in when the turbine wasn't needed.

Sullenberger explained the current 69 kilovolt power line can only be upgraded to about 50 to 55 megawatts. He said if the transmission line was upgraded, at a cost of \$7-8 million, which developers had previously stated they might invest, the line could carry up to 50-55 megawatts, which would increase the number of turbines possible. "But the power companies have no incentive to do that," Sullenberger said. "They're not about to jump into that." Getting a transmission corridor is very difficult, he added. "The one now in southwest Virginia has been on the books for 25 years," he said, explaining the difficulties of getting rights of way from private property owners. "Can you condemn? Well, you

can," he said, but it's still a difficult, time-consuming process.

Sullenberger said the Bath County Pumped Storage Station produces about 2,100 megawatts. "It's a peak load station ... It's a phenomenal contribution to the grid, and that power station uses more power than it creates." McBride's project, by comparison, would add 39 MW of power to the grid as proposed. The station in Bath produces nearly 54 times that amount.

One visitor pointed out turbines only run about 25 percent of the time, and wondered how much power they could actually produce. "It's a total guessing game as to how much power," Sullenberger said.

HNWD's project, Sullenberger said, could not hook into the 500 MW transmission line that crosses Highland to carry out the power generated by Bath's facility. "The substation they'd need to hook in would cost more than this entire project," he said.

Also, he said, there is a mistaken impression among some Highlanders that HNWD's wind facility could power the county. "That can never happen," he said, explaining that power on the grid all gets moved around in "paper transactions," whereby one area of the country in need of power "buys" it from a state producing more than its using at the time.

## **Bear Mountain Retreat**

The next stop along the tour was Bear Mountain Retreat, the educational/tourist business owned by Tom Brody and his wife, Patti Reum. The couple invited visitors to see their lodge, take a break and help themselves to refreshments on the porch. "We welcome you all," Brody said. "We're very pleased that everyone involved in the decision-making process is here."

Brody explained he had been there 20 years, and that he and his wife had dedicated themselves to promoting Bear Mountain as a retreat, though Reum also serves as Highland schools' gifted and talented coordinator. Bear Mountain is a seasonal business, Brody explained, one he'd built over 21 winters. "I always count by the winters because I can't believe I've stayed through them," he laughed.

Bear Mountain Retreat offers guests "a beautiful, peaceful place for people to stay," he said, "and their experience starts the minute they leave the highway (U.S. 250)."

Brody said they have worked hard, and seen their business grow particularly well this year. "We promote the county, and tourism," Reum explained. "It's agri-tourism, it's nature tourism."

The retreat is located on the border with West Virginia, and is a spot on the Virginia

bird-watching trail. It offers workshops, on everything from painting to crafts, a place for family reunions, and camping excursions, welcoming guests from states all over the U.S. "People from the city cannot believe the stars here," Reum said, describing the sounds of owls, and the native wildlife that fascinate their visitors.

Brody and Reum described their regular visits from governors' school students, and the camping experience offered to visitors who feel "comfortable and safe." The couple intends to expand their outdoor camping area.

"We love what we do," she said. Furthermore, she said, they refer their clients to other businesses in Highland County, including inns and restaurants. "Guests leave here in an incredibly relaxed state of mind," she added.

## **Red Oak Knob**

The group moved back to McBride's property to visit Red Oak Knob, the other site for a second grouping of at least nine turbines in a wishbone-style arrangement. McBride pointed out the power line crossing the area, connecting Monterey to Bartow, W. Va. He said again he wasn't sure about the maximum number of turbines that could be placed there. "It depends on the model of turbine," Tal McBride explained, saying turbines need to be about 500 to 1,000 feet apart. "They're not like peach trees," Mac McBride said. "I wish they were."

"You really don't care about this county, do you?" Mr. Goodall asked Mac McBride. "You don't care about your neighbors."

McBride said he didn't think that was a suitable question, and a discussion ensued between the McBrides, county officials, and those touring the sites.

Highland resident Rick Webb asked McBride whether he would consider not constructing the project if he knew most residents didn't want it and, how the residents' opinions could be demonstrated to his satisfaction.

"I don't know if I have an answer to that," McBride said. "I don't know that many are opposed to it." McBride further told Webb this was not a public meeting. "We are here to answer questions from the officials ... I don't mean to be rude, but you're badgering."

"I don't think that 2,500 people from the county are here telling me they don't want this," McBride added.

Highland resident Ernie Elliott told supervisors, "You guys don't listen to anything."

"You're welcome to your opinion," Sullenberger said. "We're going through a process here ..."

Planning commission member David Kiser added, "That's why we elected these supervisors, to make these decisions."

Several in the group responded they had voted for current board members, but did not feel as if their concerns were being heard by supervisors.

"I am listening to you," Sullenberger said.

Webb explained that before the last board election, this commercial wind project was not an issue on the table.

McBride and his son said it certainly was an issue before the general election. Mac McBride said when he first read about the idea, he took it to then-zoning administrator Lisa Kodger, who's now on the planning commission, and said he thought wind energy was a "strong possibility" for Highland County. "And I told Jerry, and I told Robin," he said. "For six years we've been talking about it, and the county's been kept abreast."

Webb asked whether officials would consider a referendum on the issue of industrial wind energy in Highland County.

"I don't know what the process is," Sullenberger said.

McBride asked Webb, "I want to know how you feel about it."

"I'm opposed to it," Webb responded. "This is the last, best place in the world." U.S. Wind Force has been quoted in *The Recorder* as saying it's closely watching what happens in Highland County, Webb added.

Brody asked McBride, "Has anybody else signed a lease with your company in the county?"

"Yes," McBride said, though he declined to identify those involved.

Wednesday, McBride reiterated that Highland New Wind Development had leased other land in Highland County, but said he did not want to divulge which property or properties were leased.

McBride and his son questioned Brody about a permit he'd received for a small wind turbine on Bear Mountain. Brody explained he had received a permit for one for "small wind" used by individuals which "I see as being more viable," he said.

McBride concluded, "I love my place as much as you love your place."

Highland resident Sandy Bratton, whose property Sapling Ridge is visible from the turbine sites, asked McBride about what kind of lights would be on them.

"That's up to the FAA," McBride explained. "It will be a blinking red light," Tal McBride added.

McBride thanked everyone who had joined the tour. "I appreciate all your questions, though some I resent and I don't mind telling you that, but I particularly appreciate the county's administration being here."

Rexrode briefly entertained questions from several who are opposed to the facility. "I'm

still doing research," he told them, adding he expected his research to be complete "very shortly." Asked whether he'd have all the information, Rexrode said, "All that I need.

"For every one of you who say you don't want them up here," Rexrode said, "there's one of you who says, put them up. When you're a supervisor, you have to ask what it can do for the whole county ... You cannot use 'just because I don't want to see something' as a means to totally reject something," he said. "What cleaner industry have you got?"

"I've got one," replied Edmund Hevener, president of Highland Data in Blue Grass, a data processing company.

Rexrode said he still wants to go to Pennsylvania and see turbines there. "I can't take one issue. I've got to ask is there any good about them?" he said. "I've got to look at both sides."

Asked whether supervisors would consider any polling Highland residents on the issue, Rexrode said, "No. We're going to do enough research and make a good decision."

Adjoining landowner Laurie Berman said she'd consulted an expert appraiser who said the project would negatively affect property values in the area.

"Our county appraiser never said that," Rexrode replied.

Berman asked him about people who say they won't buy property in Highland if the project is approved and built; Rexrode said the county has received calls from folks like that, adding, "I don't like being held hostage ... Not everybody agrees with ya'll," he said.

McBride said again to some of the visitors that he considers wind on Allegheny Mountain a "crop" that can be harvested. "It's here. Nature put it here, and it gives us a means for staying here and keeping this land the way it is," he said, explaining he was very much against nuclear power. "This (utility) is a drop in the bucket" for power, McBride said. "But if nobody ever puts a drop in the bucket, where will we be?"

Wednesday, McBride told *The Recorder* he has known for several years some nearby and adjoining landowners are opposed to the project. "But I question whether they've done enough homework themselves," he said. "I'm not going to scalp the top of those mountains. They're already open. And any landowner, if he wants to cut trees on his property, can do that. People need to stop and think. I'm not going to do anything to hurt that property. I'm trying to enhance the value of it, and I think these other landowners' properties could be enhanced, too, with all this wind up there."

Asked whether he or his family would be severely affected if the project was not approved by the county, McBride told *The Re-*

*Recorder*, "You can answer that just as well as I can." He said it depended on whether he was willing to take his money and do something else with the property. "I'm just trying to survive like anyone else. I'm trying to keep this in one, beautiful tract of land. I'm not interested in selling it or I'd have done that long before now. I think this property is better today than it was when I bought it and I'm proud of that."

As for being unable to install the wind utility becoming a hardship, McBride said, "No. I just can't think of a better use than that ... I'm doing this for one reason and one reason only — I am absolutely convinced the oil situation, and gas, is critical in this country. And wind is one of those things, so is solar, that can help. There is a lot of wind in this country that can benefit all of us, and benefit this county, and the air we breathe."

On Red Oak Knob, resident John Sweet asked Rexrode how supervisors will accurately gauge how the majority of Highlanders feel about developing commercial wind energy plants in the county. "You need to base your ideas on the public record," Sweet said, "not just on what you hear at Fast Break or High's."

Rexrode disagreed. "Sometimes, John, you really ought to learn to believe folks ... You have to look beyond what this group says or this group says. There's people in the county that wants change ... We've got to do a whole lot of research yet."

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