

# Listen to the people, gather the facts

Highland's future, and its past, met face to face last week, and all that stood between them was the wrought iron courtroom railing that separated the county's people from its leaders. It might as well have been a canyon.

Last week's public hearing called to assess the people's will regarding the prospect of industrial-scale wind power in Highland ended with the people's will being largely ignored. After more than 30 speakers representing all walks of county life stood in calm, deliberate and articulate opposition to allowing a "wind farm" here without far more study of the consequences, planner Harry Sponaugle moved to favorably recommend Highland New Wind Development's request to allow 400-foot towers on Allegheny Mountain and, down the road, anyplace else in the county.

"We've heard all of one side tonight," planner Jacob Hevener said by way of explaining his second to the motion. "What about the people who aren't here? Don't you think their views should count?"

It took a moment for the stunned audience to grasp what they had just heard. No one in favor of the proposal was present in the courtroom; or if they were, none had the conviction to stand up and say so. This hearing was the place for those supporting HNWD's facility to make their case just as much as it was for opponents to stand in the way. The verdict was overwhelming.

To have discounted such clear and abundant evidence — including the almost 500 petition signatures of county property owners collected door-to-door — was a slap in the face to those who had the courage to stand up.

Lisa Kodger, in contrast to her fellow planners, took the public sentiment seriously and made an initial motion not to recommend HNWD's application for an exemption. But when her colleagues failed to second her motion, it opened the door for Hevener to turn the dynamics of the meeting completely around. The ensuing 2-2 split on a motion by Sponaugle for approval resulted in the unsatisfactory conclusion of no recommendation at all.

With the ball in their court, supervisors also took a pass on a chance to respond favorably to the people's will. Without any discussion, the board moved to table its decision, effectively leaving matters in limbo again. At the very least, board members might have given a nod to the message they had just heard. They should have offered some insights on what they're thinking, and where they're leaning in the decision making process. Foremost in that discussion would be defining the sentiment in favor of commercial wind power that all three say they hear regularly. If 500 people are willing to put their name on the record in opposition, those in favor could be more visible and vocal.

If there is one argument for approving the application that has some traction, it is that landowners should have a right to do what they want on their own property. It's a core conviction Hevener has held through his many years as a fiercely independent farmer and public official, and it's one shared by many who live here. It's a conviction we share. There have been many cases in the course of Highland's planning process over the years where conditional use permits have been granted to allow common-sense variances from regulations. But most of those exceptions have one thing in common — they did not adversely affect

their neighbors.

In the case of wind industry, virtually everyone in the county will suffer adverse effects to their property, with the exception of the few landowners who could profit from leasing tower sites to power companies. No one should have that right.

Hevener, and others whose lives are deeply rooted in Highland history, have molded the county over generations, with great energy and pride, into the extraordinary natural wonder it is. That's why it's so hard to understand why he, or any of these families, would choose now to abandon all that for the very speculative prospect of utility-driven tax dollars that would be more than offset in the long run by the certain loss of tourism revenue. How rich is the irony that some of those who helped create this paradise would consider selling it out, while those who have more recently come upon it are determined to save it.

Hevener *is* Highland County. The man-made symmetry and natural beauty of his Hightown farm are the very essence of what makes people want to visit and live here. Those rolling pastures at the foot of Lantz Mountain are among the most photographed rural attractions in the state. The Blue Grass Valley, in its splendor, is the county's soul. Can he really envision 400-foot, turbine-bearing towers topped by strobe lights running down those ridge lines? Judging from his comments earlier this week, we have reason to hope not.

The most consistent theme at last week's meeting was to not put the horse before the cart. At the very least, Highland's comprehensive land use plan should be finished, and it should include a position on wind power before any approvals are offered. If wind power is a good idea, it will be a good idea five years from now when its consequences are well-known. To that end, the best thing our supervisors could do for all of us is to impose a minimum two-year moratorium on wind power decisions, during which the missing information can be gathered and assessed.

When the story is fully told, we remain confident that we'll all be glad we waited.

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