

1,000 sign up to oppose wind utility

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — More than 1,000 signatures have been collected from Highland County residents and landowners who oppose the proposed wind utility plant atop Allegheny Mountain. There are four individuals on record in support of the plan.

Petitions have been distributed in person by a handful of local residents who are not in favor of Highland New Wind Development's proposal, which includes about 20 turbines, 400 feet in height, generating approximately 39 megawatts of power.

Postcards were mailed to those who had not yet signed a personally distributed petition. Each card posed the statement, "I/we the undersigned owners of property in Highland County, Virginia wish to express our strong opposition to the development of industrial wind farms in Highland County." It asked for a signature, printed name, address, and whether the signer was a county resident.

"These people are voluntarily signing," said resident Charlotte Stephenson, an organizer in the fight against wind power here and one of those distributing cards. She will continue collecting signatures, and has been receiving about 15 to 30 per day since the mailing a couple of weeks ago. "As long as they come in, we'll continue to add names to our database. It's just been a tremendous response from home owners here, and other landowners."

Stephenson describes those organizing the petition drive as a loose group of residents. "We aren't any kind of an organization," she said, "just a few concerned citizens that have gotten together."

Petition signatures collected in person have been introduced into the county record on the issue, and the group will submit the final list at a later date to include those who have signed postcards returned to Blue Grass resident Carol Bandy.

Stephenson and Bandy caution the collection of signatures has not been thoroughly checked for duplicates, and they say in the current count there is likely to be some overlap.

The list amounts to 1,056 names as of press

time this week. Those include 624 residents, and 432 non-resident landowners. Among those who signed, some were husband and wife in the same household. Of 1,100 households in the county, the number of resident signatures represents about 63 percent standing in opposition, give or take some margin of error. There is currently no empirical evidence as to how the remaining households stand on the issue.

The Recorder researched all letters submitted to the board of supervisors, and found an overwhelming number of those were opposed to the project as well; many had sent more than one letter over the last 12 months, and most had spoken in opposition publicly during that time.

Four people wrote in favor of the plan or in support of the idea of wind energy in general. One of the four signed his letter as a Highland resident.

Alden Hathaway of Purcellville wrote as a representative of Environmental Resources Trust, which supports wind energy development. He cited pollution from ozone and nitrogen oxide as a serious problem in Washington, D.C., and noted four surrounding counties there have agreed to purchase more wind power. "From where I sit as an environmentalist, I look at the McBrides as modern day heroes," he wrote, concluding that Virginia can be "part of the problem or part of the solution." Hathaway said, "If the folks in Highland County do not want wind power, let them turn to solar power or otherwise turn off their lights. We in Northern Virginia do not want to breathe the dirty air from coal-fired power plants anymore."

H.D. Herold of Christiansburg said he was prompted by the postcard to voice his support of the utility. He said he felt most of the "hot air" on the issue was coming from those who were not native to Highland, and a person's opinion didn't count for him unless he or she had deep family roots in the county. If individuals "do not have at least two generations in the soil of this county, they do not have my ear," he wrote. Herold cited a potentially lower tax base for average, native Highlanders as one reason he supports the idea. Though he said

the project would not affect him personally, it will affect "those native Highlanders whose parents and grandparents have worked the land" and seek to remain and have a future in the county.

Cliff Rexrode of Waynesboro wrote, "The Recorder's crusade against Highland New Wind Development has been based entirely on subjective and illogical statements and conclusions." Rexrode said if the country needs more electric power, "I'll vote for wind power over more coal mines, dirty air, and dams."

Matthew Blagg of Doe Hill, son of supervisor Lee Blagg, said it was rumored that 120 wind turbines will be built in West Virginia, and "I will be able to see several from my front porch." Though he said he personally didn't care whether the HNWD project was constructed, it would be a shame to lose any possible tax revenue Highland could realize. "Please don't let a minority of the population run the county," he wrote.

The overwhelming sentiment in opposition to the project has focused largely on the lack of information provided by HNWD in its application, the unclear local benefits, and the sense that supervisors cannot prevent further ridge-top development from other corporations once a precedent has been set.

There were no other comments in favor of the proposal in the record, but supervisors have said they've spoken to just as many residents who support the plan as those opposed. County administrator Roberta Lambert said supervisor Jerry Rexrode keeps a written list of people he speaks to, but copies are not filed with her. Supervisors could not be reached for comment this week before early deadlines.

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