

Leadership requires persuasion

The story in today's Recorder outlining the cozy relationship between Pendleton County's elected leadership and a wind power developer looking for easy pickings is a stunning example of what goes wrong when citizens are left in the dark.

Without informing the media, i.e. the public, and apparently behind closed doors, Pendleton's three commissioners took it upon themselves to make a deal with U.S. Wind Force that, if unchallenged, will result in 100-foot easements for a transmission line over private property owners there. Some 50 wind towers are planned along a portion of the spine of Jack Mountain to where it enters Highland County near Doe Hill which will require stringing a 139-kilovolt transmission line from the site to a substation near Franklin. In other words, this is a very big deal.

When the news broke after some property owners learned — after the fact — that the power lines would be crossing their land, a frantic group of citizens began desperately looking for answers and a way to undo what had so brazenly and unethically been done. So far, they haven't had much luck and if they were hoping their commissioners and the developers would be repentant for having betrayed them, they have to be disappointed.

Regarding two days of secret meetings with the Wind Force folks, commissioner Joe Bodkin said, "This was done quietly so there wouldn't be any outcry. I've seen what happens (to past development proposals in the county). Everything fell through because everyone's opposed to everything."

As for U.S. Wind's power brokers (no relation to Highland New Wind Developers driving the Highland wind project) their response to the concerned citizens who had the gall to question their plan was that it was time for West Virginians to step up to the plate. "I'm going to give you a little tough love," one of them told the residents. "If this community takes the position that we want electricity, but we don't want it generated in my backyard, well that's not my definition of looking at the greater good."

What an extraordinary statement. As a woman in the audience quickly pointed out, West Virginia, more than any other state in the union, has put its energy resources on the table for the good of the nation at the cost of many of its mountain tops and the purity of its streams and rivers.

What Pendleton's commissioners have done is to abdicate leadership in favor of enduring the difficulty of exercising it. Leaders don't ignore followers, and they don't tell followers what to do. Leaders persuade their constituents on the basis of facts and circumstances. They don't seize land by eminent domain, they convince the owners and the community at large their vision is in the majority's best interests. This commission has failed terribly, so terribly it would be surprising if what it has created isn't dismantled by the courts.

We are fortunate in Highland County to be operating under a very different set of circumstances as we grapple with how to handle the introduction of wind power here. Our supervisors have been generally forthcoming from the start of the process that began almost three years ago. They have spent a great deal of time gathering facts and listening to public opinion and have walked for the most part a neutral line. They have been responsive to the public through the press. It has not always been comfortable for them to be this open, but they have chosen to do what they were elected to do — represent the people, not special interests.

When the decision comes here, it will come down on a public vote. We are confident each will explain his position to a public that will surely want to know on what it was based. Either way, we will live with it because we all had our opportunities to participate in the resolution.

We continue to believe the decision will be made on majority sentiment as opposed to the uncertain promise of utility tax dollars. We don't think our leadership will lock the county into short-term gains at the expense of opportunities for a much more prosperous and meaningful long term future.

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