



Highland supervisors, Robin Sullenberger, Jerry Rexrode, and Lee Blagg, will come face to face with the toughest decision of their political careers next month. It is incumbent on them to share their positions on wind power before they cast a vote that will greatly affect generations of Highlanders to come.

Put your cards on the table

“Highland County’s plan for future development should be based on community principles. It is crucial the attributes that most define local character be identified, protected, and capitalized upon. Highland is distinguished by breathtaking mountain and valley scenery, vast stretches of pastoral land, a unique role in American history, and a close-knit sense of community ... The most desirable developments will be those that complement the county’s natural and cultural setting.”

— Highland County Comprehensive Plan

Highland officials seem convinced they can maintain control over the proposed wind generating utility on Allegheny Mountain, and others like it that will surely come our way if we open the door. They believe they can approve the “wind farm” under strict conditions, and everyone here will benefit from revenue it could bring to the county without eventually degrading our quality of life. In the face of the facts, that position is naive at best.

Neither the money nor the power a wind plant produces is guaranteed. There is mounting evidence our local leaders will have little or no control over this project, and if they do now, it’s likely to be quickly removed from their hands as the enormous power of big money freely flowing trumps the good intentions of a small county.

Witness our West Virginia neighbors to the north. In Tucker County, where there is a wind facility up and running, not one dollar has been collected by local government in the two years since blades began turning. Of the more than 200 jobs promised, only about five materialized. Tucker officials believe they can still collect from the project, but it’s a complicated process. This was the first utility like it in their state, and they caution others to negotiate bet-

ter, smarter, and sooner. Highland County, as the first in Virginia sited for wind turbines, would do well to heed this advice.

Witness the farmers and landowners in Pendleton County, where a different wind developer is gaining a foothold. Their battle against the projected use of eminent domain continues, and it seems they aren’t likely to overcome a company with millions of dollars at its disposal that it can use as leverage to get its way. Control has been removed from the hands of Pendleton officials who believed everything the company told them and relinquished their responsibility to their constituents in a way that they will likely long regret.

Listen to the state agencies which have the final say in how or where utilities are built. The West Virginia Public Service Commission learned a hard lesson about wind plants. It approved a few projects before anyone really understood the impacts on property values, local economies or the environment. That state is now under the microscope. Some West Virginia legislators are calling for a moratorium on wind plants until more is learned about the consequences of their construction.

Listen to Virginia’s State Corporation Commission, which would review a wind utility in Highland if the developer applies for a permit. The SCC may pride itself on being an independent agency, but its commissioners are keenly aware that powerful Northern Virginia legislators will push for the opportunity to improve reliable power for their broad base of voters. The pressure to allow these “green energy” facilities in politically vulnerable western Virginia will be enormous.

But most of all, supervisors need to listen to the people who voted them into office. Grant the recent request by chamber of commerce director Carolyn Pohowsky. She asks for an-

other informational meeting before the January vote on Highland New Wind Development’s bid for a zoning amendment that would alter the height restrictions and allow 400-foot towers on Red Oak Knob and any other ridge in the county. Hear what the great majority of your constituents are telling you, and if you have a different point of view, have the integrity and courage to put it on the table long before you vote. Each of you has said you have thoroughly researched the ramifications of industrial wind power. What have you learned that would lead you to abandon the county’s long-term mission as stated in its comprehensive land use plan?

Before you consider selling out Highland’s promising future on the false premise that we are a poor and struggling community in desperate need of a recreation complex, we need to know exactly how you arrived at that decision.

There is one argument on the table whose truth is unimpeachable. If wind is a good idea now, it will be an even better idea five years from now when all its ramifications are more completely understood. Give Highland the time to do the right thing based on the right information. Let the committee you appointed and entrusted to review our comprehensive plan finish that task before preempting their charge with a premature decision.

Beyond the developer’s desire to capitalize on currently available highly profitable tax incentives, there is no reason to rush this process along. When you consider the impact of perhaps hundreds of wind towers on our landscape over the next five years, there is every reason not to.

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