

# Wind power proponents find a voice

It was refreshing and enlightening to hear what one supporter of wind facilities in Highland County had to say this week. It was the first time anyone has heard a public official talk up potential benefits of Highland New Wind Development's proposal for an industrial-scale utility on Allegheny Mountain. It was also unsettling in that it came from Dave Smith, a man with extensive development background, and a wide range of life experience whose opinions were well-defined.

As chairman of the Industrial Development Authority, Smith led a thoughtful and cordial discussion about the impact 400-foot commercial wind turbines on county ridges might have. With input from at least two IDA members opposed to the project, and hard questions from some attending Monday's meeting, the result was an in-depth debate about many of the concerns that have been raised during the three years this project has loomed over Virginia's most rural county. The story in today's Recorder reflects the range of the discussion.

Smith's arguments entail what he sees as a need to attract industry, and the potential revenue and job opportunities it could bring. He couples this with feelings about the nation's need to wean itself off a dependence on foreign oil. He believes Highland County can carefully site a handful of industrial wind facilities without opening the door to developing every ridge line. And it's his opinion, as a strong supporter of good zoning practices and property rights, that such projects would not be detrimental to land values.

His line of thinking probably resonates with the minority of landowners here who also support the proposal, including the few who could profit from it. It is, therefore, critical to address those beliefs in terms of whether they hold water given what we know about the increasingly lucrative wind industry and the power such developers carry on the state and federal level.

One of Smith's strongest contentions is that Highland needs revenue. But at this point, no one can correctly define Highland's economic state as depressed. The reality is, with a less than 2 percent unemployment rate and one of the lowest property tax rates in Virginia, Highland is far from deteriorating. And it's not wind that will ensure greater prosperity, it is — as in Bath County — a singular quality of life that will do that.

Is Highland so desperate for cash it must consider endangering the major asset it has to offer future generations? We don't think so, nor do the large majority of county property owners. It was IDA member Gideon Hiner, with research in hand, who made the most salient point of the evening — that this decision is not about money and never should be.

Smith's contention that Highland could isolate areas where wind turbines would have the least impact, and turn down any others, is simply a game of roulette. He believes the county risks a lawsuit if it doesn't allow McBride to put one on his property. We say the opposite is more likely — a multi-million-dollar corporate suit from a developer that would argue if Highland approved this one, they, too, should be allowed in. Other East Coast states are in crisis over a proliferation of turbines that appears will continue, supported by your tax dollars in the form of federal subsidies and tax breaks.

For states who want to slow down the process they naively entered into, it's becoming a tough battle on levels Highland has no hope of winning, and certainly no interest in joining. Just recently, a group in Kansas trying to save one of this continent's last tall grass prairies lost its bid to stop a wind plant from fragmenting a fragile 8,000 acres near Wichita.

The IDA will continue these discussions. Anyone interested in the final score needs to participate. We don't know whether the authority will reach a consensus and make a recommendation to supervisors. And we don't know whether the county board would give such a recommendation much weight, especially if it's in opposition to wind power here. But if nothing else, Highlanders have an expanded opportunity to continue to share and disseminate information on a matter that deeply impacts their lives and the lives of their children.

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