

IDA joins wind talks

Chairman takes position project good for county

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — For the first time since a wind energy developer proposed industrial-scale turbines for Allegheny Mountain here, there was a real debate about what such a project might mean for Virginia's least-populated county. And until the end of a two-hour discussion, the handful of those attending, mostly opponents, were generally pleased to hear the issues on both sides tackled with candor.

At the request of Highland's supervisors, Highland County's Industrial Development Authority held its first meeting in more than a year Monday. After reorganizing to install new officers, it launched into its assignment: To review information on commercial wind energy and, if possible, come to a consensus and make a recommendation to supervisors about the project at hand.

Reelected chairman Dave Smith of McDowell steered the discussion, offering his own take on the matter and asking his colleagues to consider what he'd learned and offer their own opinions.

"We have people on both sides of the aisle in this community," he said, "and that's the way it is on our committee here. We need to be as factual as we can, and try to explore some of the things going around (about wind energy) and answer some questions if we can. Then we need to make a recommendation back to the board of supervisors. It's not an easy decision on anybody's part. We've all heard a lot of rumors, and there's some that's true and some that's not true."

Smith said if the IDA cannot reach a consensus on the issue, "We won't be the first. But the board has asked us to take a look at this ... We're not going to please everybody," he added, "but we all live in Highland County, we all own property here, and also, in my judgement, this affects the whole county."

Smith was generally supportive of wind utilities in Highland, as a source of tax revenue and step toward helping the U.S. generate other sources of energy. "I'd like to see this country not be beholden to foreign oil and I know there's no one answer to this," he said. Referring to his research, he said there could be 100 additional coal plants needed in the next

few years. "I'd go with wind and solar over that anytime, and focus on cleaner energy," he said.

IDA vice chair Richard Shamrock noted Dominion Virginia Power would like to build more nuclear plants. It would take at least 1,000 wind turbines to meet the power supply generated by one nuclear facility, he said. Even if every ridge in Virginia were developed, it "couldn't possibly produce enough energy."

Smith believes Highland "better have the facts straight" to avoid potential lawsuits, especially from large developers like U.S. Wind Force, whose proposal for a facility in neighboring Pendleton County, W.Va., has resulted in bitter resistance from residents there. "What's a lawsuit going to cost?" Smith asked. "And who's going to pay for that? The taxpayers are going to pay for that. (Big companies) would file a lawsuit in the bat of an eye."

Smith said some wind plants should be supported in Highland because they could mean more money for the county, but that too many would be detrimental. "If we could get income into this county, think what it would do to property taxes. Think what it would do for the school system in this county. I've got to think from the perspective about all our people in the county. What is the best for the whole?" he said. Highland can determine the best places for wind plants and then outline those areas for potential development, he said. "I submit that McBride's is one of the best locations in Highland County in terms of impact as far as anyone's concerned. They could be sited, and then control where they go. The decision could be made in one or two years, and in the meantime, you just don't take anymore applications (from wind developers)."

Smith, a staunch supporter of proper zoning, said Highland needs more homes, and its zoning regulations are designed "somewhat loose" in order to give the county flexibility in land use decisions. He felt balance was needed, but wondered, "How do you do that and protect your flanks against (proliferation) of these things?" The IDA has been asked over the years to help bring industry to the county, he said, but because of Highland's location and mountain roads, getting raw materials in and out is a big obstacle. Without more industry, he surmised, the county cannot provide jobs

for its younger generations. "Our young kids have to go away from here. I think we need as many jobs and as much money as we can get. Our taxes increase all the time."

Austin Shepherd, a longtime IDA member, asked whether there were any job opportunities associated with HNWD's project. Smith said it appeared there would not be many, maybe four or five after construction, and that even during construction most jobs would likely be filled with those who have experience in the industry.

IDA member Jim White said the majority of Highland's property owners were opposed to allowing even one wind plant, and that was reason enough to turn down the proposal from Highland New Wind Development. "I hate to tell (all those opponents) that they really don't matter. There are a lot here against it," he said.

Blue Grass resident Ske Ellington agreed. "This is common sense," he said. "Does the county want it to happen? If it doesn't, you don't allow it." Ellington said that should be the paramount question to answer, and believes the majority of county landowners have made it clear they do not support wind industry in this county.

"For me," Smith said, "I think the issue is, what is the revenue? How good is it, and is there a guarantee? I think something can be negotiated." He said Highlanders supporting the project have been criticized, and though many signed a petition opposing wind development here, he believed many of them would change their minds in a heartbeat if the revenue stream was good enough.

Smith held up a copy of a recent Recorder opinion page showing a color photograph of a turbine at the Backbone Mountain wind project in Tucker County, W.Va. "This is trick photography," Smith said, making a point that the newspaper's reporting on wind energy was "one of the problems."

Monterey resident Rich Holman reminded Smith he had repeatedly said a decision should be made on facts and truth, and asked Smith whether he could prove the photograph had been altered. "I don't have to prove it," Smith said. "Call it whatever you want — this is trick photography."

Recorder general manager Anne Adams, who was covering the meeting, pointed out

there was absolutely nothing altered about the photograph, which was taken from the side of the road with a normal lense with a Nikon digital camera. Others agreed what one sees in the picture is exactly how it looks on the approach to the Tucker County site from the south.

IDA member Gideon Hiner called attention to a study done by the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission, local colleges, and the Shenandoah Valley Partnership on land use issues. The study found that impacts on scenic, cultural and historical assets were top priorities in making good decisions, and revenue was only one small part to consider. "You can't just look at only the monetary aspect," Hiner said. "This recommends that through development, you also promote quality of life, preserving natural beauty and character ... all of these are impacting us. It's not just going to be a financial issue."

Smith led a discussion on a list of concerns given to the IDA by supervisors (see sidebar) and said the IDA should have as few meetings as possible to fulfill the supervisors' request and get a decision made for McBride. "The county has to give the man an answer, yes or no," Smith said. "Don't make the man spend millions and then say no. Let (supervisors) make a decision on this one and then let's talk the issues out intelligently."

The IDA meets again at 7 p.m. on Monday, March 7 in the modular conference room. Authority members are: Dave Smith, chairman; Richard Shamrock, vice chairman; Cindy Wood, secretary; Austin Shepherd, Jim White, Gideon Hiner, and Olin Sponaugle.

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