

Windmills considered on false premise

How many times have we heard over the years that Highland County is in desperate need of jobs and additional tax revenues to stay afloat? Enough, it seems, that most people probably believe it. That's unfortunate because historically, that has seldom been the case — and it's certainly not true now.

Highland, by any standards, is in very good financial shape. And as such, we most certainly do not need to welcome an industry (wind power generation) that has the real potential to ruin us while offering little in return. Nor any other incompatible proposal that will certainly crop up down the road. We are in the comfortable position of being able to carefully chart our course of growth.

Highland's budget (\$5.7 million) is the state's smallest, but even that relatively small sum can be hard to track and understand given all the variables that go into its construction. A few things, however, are clear after digesting certified public accountant Steve Fullerton's critique of the county's financial process in today's Recorder. Highland has more than enough money to fund the essential services it is required to provide taxpayers, and it's quite likely the county's tax base will continue to grow as property values increase with the influx of new construction and land acquisition we currently enjoy.

There is reason to celebrate these findings, but there is also cause for concern. Why have we been given the impression we are in financial straits so dire that a tax increase of 5 cents per \$100 of assessed value was passed by the board last year when, in fact, we were operating with a surplus? Where does all this talk about poverty and joblessness come from?

Is it our smallness in numbers that leads us to feel somehow vulnerable, and left too often on the short end of the stick? Around here, small can become a pejorative word associated with deprivation and lack of opportunity no matter how much we relish the advantages of wide open spaces and neighbors we know and trust. Never mind that our jobless rate hovers at less than 2 percent and real poverty here is virtually nil. Never mind that most in Highland enjoy a quality of life they appreciate and want to maintain.

It's hard to argue that stashing away money for a rainy day isn't prudent, and we wouldn't suggest the county's budget should reflect a break-even bottom line each fiscal year. But the amount of surplus should be the minimum required by common sense. The county is not meant to operate as a bank or an investment company. It need only meet its basic requirements for the public's welfare within the tax dollars it's allotted. It should certainly not raise taxes unless there is a very specific reason to do so. Under current practice, the money "earmarked" for future use is not always clearly defined.

Fullerton's examination has exposed a flaw in how the budget works here. By their own admission, supervisors Robin Sullenberger and Lee Blagg leave the bulk of the process up to Jerry Rexrode, on the grounds that he understands it better than they do. As with any board, the responsibility for budget decisions rests equally with all three members. They need to be fully engaged in budgeting and lend their perspective to its construction. They need to probe and question it, and be able to defend it. We understand Blagg will be at the table during this year's budget process, and that will be a good start.

Rexrode's speculation that siting three "wind farms" in Highland could raise the level of education here to the point we could be turning out "an endless stream of physicians" from our schools was undoubtedly exaggerated for effect, but it points out another flaw in our approach to government's role in society. No amount of money applied to public education will achieve that end. Huge amounts have been wasted in supporting the theory that money equates to excellence. The academic record of Highland's students is one of the best in the state, and there are plenty of huge school systems spending far more per student yet failing miserably. Our schools succeed because they operate on a human scale, where students feel confident in themselves and secure in their environment.

We hope the county will take Fullerton's observations to heart, and even accept his offer to assist in financial matters related to his considerable expertise. He is not a threat. He is a home-grown asset. At the very least, a budgeting seminar for board members and interested residents conducted by Fullerton would seem constructive.

In the meantime, Highland's future remains tied directly to its past. What we have here is valuable beyond calculation and, left intact, it will more than take care of the needs of generations to follow. To continue to flirt with changing that equation for the possibility of momentary financial gratification remains irresponsible beyond understanding.