

Wind opponents spread their word during maple festival

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Opponents of industrial wind energy in Highland took advantage of the Maple Festival to reach a wider audience last weekend, but one of their tactics — placing a few signs in choice locations — upset many local residents.

Highlanders for Responsible Development, a local citizens' group formed from those who do not believe a “wind farm” should be built on county ridges, set up an informational booth at the high school last weekend, offering information packets to festival-goers.

“We interacted with lots of people,” said HRD president Charlotte Stephenson, who estimated dozens of the hand-outs were picked up by visitors. “We spoke to so many folks throughout the state who were interested and they would say, gosh, we haven’t heard about this.”

Stephenson said there were also visitors who told HRD members they had seen or experienced industrial wind energy generating plants elsewhere and did support the projects.

Of several hand-outs HRD gave away, one was interesting to many who felt wind energy would decrease the United States’ dependence on foreign oil. “I was surprised at the number of people who think like that — that wind energy should be used for that reason,” Stephenson said. “We gave them information to show that wind energy would not really compensate for dependency on oil, plus a handout on questions and answers.”

Stephenson said HRD members were also surprised about the one issue visitors asked about most frequently. “There were quite a number of them who asked one question: How are your supervisors, county leaders, receiving the pros and cons? They wanted to know whether our officials would listen to everyone’s point of view; so many were concerned about whether the local government was listening,” Stephenson said. “I told them it had been a real chore, but that I hope our work would be worth something to our supervisors.”

In addition, Stephenson said many who were signing HRD’s petition opposing wind development here were upset at officials’ comments that people in Highland would “sign anything.”

“The repeated sentiment from people I

talked with is that they are sorry to be thought of in that way,” Stephenson said. “Because they have an opposing view, their open claim is discredited in such a demeaning fashion. Instead, they would want to be taken seriously and be respected for their right to base an opposing view on the information and facts they, too, have become aware of. Another interesting comment has been that they have openly signed a petition which is public, opposing the proposed wind turbine project, and have been told for every signature against the project there is another person for the project, yet no one comes forward with a list of those supporting the project so that claim can be validated.”

Over the past year, HRD has gathered signatures from about 1,500 people opposed to industrial wind development here.

During the festival weekend, Stephenson said she did have a couple of visitors complain about the signs HRD had posted throughout the county which read, “No wind turbines in Highland County.” Some told her they believed them to be inappropriate to display during the event. “They thought it was disgusting,” Stephenson said. “But I reminded them we complied with the temporary signage law in our ordinance. And many people when they saw us (at the school) would say, Oh, so this is what the signs were about. It engaged their curiosity.”

Of the nine or 10 signs placed on major roads throughout the county, one near Monterey was stolen Friday night, and one on Jack Mountain was partially torn down. HRD members do not know who is responsible for the vandalism.

Supervisor Robin Sullenberger said this week that he, too, had heard several complaints about the signs. Most told him they thought the signs were “tacky,” and inappropriate to display during the festival. Though Sullenberger offered no personal opinion about the signs, he said even those adamantly opposed to the proposed wind project here had complained to him about the signs. “I was at a meeting yesterday with some people who had been to the festival last weekend and while they were mainly teasing about it, the comments were embarrassing.”

In a recently issued news release, HRD states, “Despite contrary arguments by county officials, members of HRD believe, and have obtained a legal opinion confirming the be-



lief, that the county will be unable to turn down future applications for industrial wind developments if it approves the one pending application. It is the position of HRD that lining the ridge tops with turbines of 400 feet or more will negatively impact the county’s growing tourist industry, cause a drop in property values, be harmful to the environment, and change the rural and pastoral nature of the county as it becomes an industrial zone.

“At the same time, relatively little electricity will be produced, and we will still need the same fossil fuel generation capacity, up and running, to provide electricity when the wind isn’t blowing.”

Stephenson says the most important thing the group hopes to do during the festival is raise awareness, especially about the potential for wind development throughout the entire state of Virginia. “There’s the possibility that these things are going to be all through our state,” she said. “There were a lot of people who didn’t know that.”

The application for ordinance changes and a permit here was submitted last August by Highland New Wind Development, LLC, owned by H.T. “Mac” McBride and his family. HNWD proposed to build a 39-megawatt facility of 18-20 turbines at 400 feet high on two sites atop Allegheny Mountain, at Highland’s western-most border with West Virginia.

Another company, U.S. Wind Force, is expected to reapply for a permit to construct a “wind farm” in adjoining Pendleton County, W.Va., which it may then extend into Highland along Jack Mountain in the Doe Hill area. This project, dubbed “Liberty Gap,” has also garnered heavy opposition from Pendleton residents and landowners, many of whom have also formed a grassroots organization called Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County.

Highlanders for Responsible Development will be at the high school again this weekend, in the hallway outside the gymnasium from about 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.