

7 Highlanders make a difference

An unanticipated victory Tuesday for opponents of wind energy development in Highland is symbolic but, as it was delivered by an unimpeachable source, impossible to ignore.

The 7-0 vote by Industrial Development Authority members advising supervisors not to alter county zoning or land use regulations to accommodate 400-foot tall wind machines was a clear signal to the board that this corner of Virginia is not prepared for industrial projects of this magnitude — not now, and maybe not ever.

The IDA's opinion stands in alignment with the will of some 1,500 Highlanders who say commercial wind turbines do not fit the definitions of the long-term plan for Highland as decided over the years by its people. Our supervisors, at least one says he will, must take that decision very seriously. After all, they asked for it.

Authority members initially felt, and some still do, they could not really contribute much toward assisting the board in pinning down potential impacts and benefits, especially since they are not responsible for making the decision. But what the IDA provided exceeded all the expectations of wind power opponents, especially for a body that had not met in more than a year before it took on this enormously important task.

The three IDA meetings on this subject have been a battleground of sorts for a mostly civil debate. Those attending, no matter where they stood on the issue, found their opinions heard, valued, and considered respectfully by all IDA members.

Free-wheeling discussion enabled aspects of wind energy generation to be thoroughly examined on all sides and upside down. There may not have been consensus on every topic, but no stones were left unturned, and just talking about them was cathartic for many project opponents as well as revealing for those in favor. The IDA, to its credit, created an open, inclusive atmosphere supervisors have not often been able to provide on controversial issues. As a result, the

facts were able to bubble up to the surface of what has been a very emotional stew.

Few, including the IDA, expected to even muster a vote. And certainly no one would have guessed any proposal would have unanimous support. But Austin Shepherd's motion recommending the county remain true to Highland's existing land use plans received the backing of all seven members, even those who had previously argued vigorously for ways to accommodate the utility's plan. Chief among those was chairman David Smith, whose vote in the affirmative may not have reflected his convictions as to the benefits of wind power as a national priority, but most certainly measured his qualities of leadership and his love of Highland County.

The ball is now back in the supervisors' court. For that board to approve the application now, even with conditions attached to the permit, would reflect disregard for the majority of people it represents. There is no way this issue can any longer be couched as a fight between the born-heres and the come-heres. Those opposed represent every section of Highland's social fabric.

The supervisors have before them some hundreds of documents examining all factors of wind energy. The IDA public discussions have identified pros and cons more precisely and laid them out more clearly. Exaggerations and platitudes have been mostly identified. The unvarnished truth stands out. To allow industrial-scale wind generation in Highland serves special interests far more than it does the general interests of the county. And if it were allowed for one applicant, there would be no way to stop others from having their way with further development at the county's expense.

Supervisor Robin Sullenberger said this week his board is leaning toward coming to a conclusion soon. That vote will, we trust, reflect the board's willingness to properly represent the majority of those who elected it. To do otherwise is not to lead, but to dictate terms.