

Excluding public a poor choice for 'collaborative'

If the Virginia Wind Energy Collaborative is truly fair and unbalanced in its stated mission to explore the pros and cons of industrial wind power generation in Virginia, it didn't do itself any favors in Harrisonburg last week by closing a meeting stacked with wind developers to the public. That decision leaves a distinctly partisan impression of an organization that many already suspect of a strong pro-wind development bias.

Working out of the spotlight would be fine except for a couple of nagging problems. This loosely structured group, with members from both the public and private sectors, is closely tied to the governor's office as a source of information, and it's funded in part with public grant money. It has no business taking sides in the wind debate that revolves around big business with a whole lot of money for a selected few on the line, along with big government firmly behind "green energy" regardless of the facts.

The Recorder, whose readership has more than a passing interest in the topic, had planned to cover the meeting and was registered to attend. The newspaper, however, was dis-invited the day before the session by way of a phone call from VWEC's Jonathan Miles. The James Madison University professor said the list of attendees was restricted to "stakeholders" in wind energy and besides, the room was too small to accommodate members of the press, others of whom were denied access as well.

Highland County residents are not considered stakeholders in this issue? The first Virginians who may have to come to grips with an industrial-scale wind facility don't count? The discussions at this conclave don't have sufficient relevance for Highlanders to get a firsthand account of what transpires in a roomful of wind energy advocates? And by the way, the room as it turned out, was only half full.

It should be said that excluding the press from this meeting is not in conflict with Virginia's Freedom of Information laws. VWEC had the right to pick its guests the way it wanted. But it had the clear, ethical obligation not to be selectively exclusive given its protestations of being an entirely neutral fact-finding organization. Several other newspapers and representatives of a citizens group opposed to wind power in Pendleton County were also refused credentials.

VWEC promises the results of the meeting, designed to help developers identify potential sites for wind projects statewide, will be released after the meeting, but only through the filter of a press release. Were organizers afraid press coverage would reflect a different picture? There was no mention of the fact that VWEC was not comfortable with the environmental working group's conclusion that all potential sites in Virginia need extensive environmental review before any applications should go through.

In the end, discussions with people who were there indicate that, in general, the meeting was broad based and concerns for the environment were given a high profile from a variety of speakers. It was not, as some had feared, a pep rally for the wind industry. Some of the big name developers didn't even show up. The government representatives were apparently even-handed in their remarks. VWEC just didn't get the answer it wanted from the people it asked to shed light on the subject, and it didn't want that rift to be made public.