

Industrial chairman draws fire

Sparks resignations

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Members of Highland County's Industrial Development Authority were stunned last week by the actions of chairman David Smith, and two of them resigned. Richard Shamrock resigned his post on the authority last Friday; 30-year IDA member Austin Shepherd stepped down Tuesday.

Some IDA members have suggested Smith should be the one to resign from the board for what they believe was a public misrepresentation of the authority's will regarding the proposed wind project.

Events have unfolded quickly since a controversial meeting last week between Smith and two other IDA members and members of Highlanders for Responsible Development, a citizens group opposing wind power here.

As a result of a series of discussions on H.T. "Mac" McBride's proposal to construct an industrial wind energy utility on Allegheny Mountain, the IDA agreed to meet with members of HRD to compile a list of pros and cons. But when Smith and IDA members Olin Sponaugle and Cindy Wood met with HRD representatives last Wednesday, no agreement was reached. According to HRD president Charlotte Stephenson, Smith presented a list of "pros" and described the IDA's position as in favor of the project — a complete reversal from what other IDA members believed the authority's position to be.

Coupled with last week's board decision to amend the county's ordinance as it pertains to height limits, at least four IDA members say they don't believe supervisors are putting much stock in their expertise or opinions on the matter.

The IDA had taken up the issue at the supervisors' request, and reviewed nearly every aspect of commercial wind energy development. Smith and Sponaugle had stood in favor of it; Shamrock, Shepherd, Wood, Gideon Hiner and Jim White were opposed.

On a motion from Shepherd at the final meeting, the IDA voted unanimously to recommend supervisors handle the permit application from Highland New Wind Development using Highland's existing comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance. The majority of the IDA members perceived that vote as a recommendation the project not be approved under current regulations. Smith, however, interpreted the vote differently.

Smith compiled a list of wind energy "pros" prior to meeting with HRD president Charlotte Stephenson and member John Sweet. Stephenson said Sweet "immediately saw serious discrepancies between opinion and fact in that list. At that point, it was clear to me there was an apparent miscommunication ... Next, Dave communicated to us he felt like the IDA's recommendation was to support McBride's efforts ... Cindy looked up and said, 'That's not at all what we said.' I said this was a total misrepresentation of the IDA ... and we left. I didn't know what to say or do."

This week, Sweet explained he and Stephenson had been "flabbergasted" by the list. "Clearly, Dave Smith is 'reinventing' the IDA vote. But there was no question what Austin Shepherd's motion meant," he said.

Stephenson explained the situation to HRD board members and is seeking their counsel on how to proceed. Thursday, Stephenson wrote to HRD members, suggesting they hold off on endorsing any list of pros and cons until the rest of the IDA had time to examine Smith's list. "Also, since Mr. Smith has reinvented the intentions of the decision made by the IDA board at the final meeting, it would appear that clarification on that matter also needs to be addressed by the IDA," she wrote.

When Shamrock heard about chairman Smith's list and his interpretation of the IDA's position, Shamrock resigned. "As chair, you listen to your committee," Shamrock says. "When you take a vote, you support that vote ... (Smith's) 'pros' are not our 'pros.' There was nothing confusing about that (vote)."

Shepherd was equally angered by Smith's perception of the IDA's vote. "No other member (of the IDA) saw that list or agrees with those pros except maybe Olin," he says. "I don't agree with what Dave has done ... He never consulted me or the rest of the IDA as far as I can tell ... I don't appreciate the way Dave has done this and I'm considering writing a letter to the board of supervisors suggesting Dave resign. We voted to follow the existing comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance, which would have prohibited these wind turbines. If the board had followed that recommendation, that would have been the end of this deal," he says. "I've never seen such a messed up situation. I've just been simmering. I just can't function that way."

In his letter of resignation to the board of supervisors, Shepherd said he was extremely disappointed the board changed the zoning ordinance last week against the wishes of the planning commission, the IDA, and some 1,500 residents and landowners who have signed petitions in opposition to the project.

Shepherd also wrote to Smith to express his concerns, and suggested Smith step down as well.

Wood, who serves as IDA secretary, said she, too, was bothered by Smith's position. "Many of the things in that list are contradictory to our position," she says. "The motion said one thing but this 'pros' list is pushing something else. I have the pros list and the cover letter Dave asked me to drop off to the board of supervisors, but I don't feel comfortable doing that. Dave has a different opinion on this ... I think we need to have another meeting ... I feel caught in the middle and I don't like it."

Monday, White said he, too, understood the IDA's position at the time of the vote to be a recommendation against approving the project at this point. "We thought we were taking a 'let's wait and see' position, telling supervisors, 'Don't do anything right now.' Dave may not have realized that himself at that meeting. I do respect people on the board but we will not tolerate lying."

HRD treasurer Steve Fullerton was also dismayed by Smith's position. Upon hearing of the pros list and Smith's stance, he wrote a letter to IDA and HRD members. "This communication also does not reflect the sentiments of the majority of the IDA board and is very inconsistent with the legal action that was taken by the IDA board by a unanimous vote.

"Up to this point, the healthy exchange between the IDA board and the citizens has been professional and well respected by all involved. For this to happen is not only sad, but is also dishonest and disrespectful to all of the IDA board members that were blind-sided. If even one member of the IDA board was unaware of this communication to the board of supervisors under the auspices that it reflected the consensus of the board, I would encourage Mr. Smith and Mr. Sponaugle to step down as members of the county's IDA board or, I would encourage the IDA board to ask Mr. Smith and Mr. Sponaugle for their resignations."

For his part, Smith says he doesn't understand his colleagues' reaction. He says he understood the IDA's vote, and believes the recommendation to follow the existing zoning regulations means HNWD's project can be approved. In his opinion, McBride's utility plans comply with the current ordinance. "It's very clear to me," he says, "but obviously we have a difference of opinion on what it said."

Smith says he has no intention of resigning unless supervisors ask him to, and that he will not call another meeting about the pros and cons list. "I'm not saying (the list) represented the position of the IDA," he says. "The IDA has not taken a position."

Smith believed from previous discussions that Shepherd was in favor of the project. "Then he made that motion. What was I supposed to think?" he says.

Smith does not expect other IDA members to agree with his "pros" list, and says he assumed their position was represented by the "cons" list generated by HRD; he called his list a "minority report."

Supervisor Robin Sullenberger was unaware of the IDA's concerns when contacted by The Recorder Monday. He says he knew members were divided on the issue of industrial wind energy. "I understand that anything we (the board) receive is not necessarily the collective wisdom of the IDA."

Most IDA members felt the authority had made its decision clear, and were disappointed in the supervisors' decision last week to change the zoning ordinance against their recommendation.

Supervisors, says Shamrock, are ignoring the advice of the very people they appointed to advise them. "I just can't associate with this kind of thinking," he says, calling local governing officials a "total embarrassment."

Shepherd agrees. "Who are they representing? Not the people in Highland County," he says.

"That whole meeting the other night (Thursday's public hearing) made the rest of us feel like we really don't count. It's discouraging, and I don't get discouraged easily," White adds.

Wood says when the IDA started discussions about the wind energy project, she didn't have an opinion about it one way or the other. "But as I read more and heard more, I felt I had an opinion — I don't think they're right for our county," she says. "To me, potential income would be the only reason to allow (commercial wind utilities) but since that's not guaranteed, how do you take that chance? I think it's way too risky. I don't see why Highland County has to be the first (in Virginia), has to be the guinea pig for these things."

Smith says he is still very much in favor of McBride's proposal, believing people should put their country before their county. "I feel sorry sometimes for McBride," he says. "Some people get so emotional and it's tough to take that stuff. Is he out to make some money? Obviously. But the man deserves an answer."