

Dealing with the consequences of folly

If there's anyone left in Highland who still believes in our county supervisors' power to control wind utility development, this is your wake up call.

State lawmakers are already proposing to take that power away. If a Virginia Beach senator gets his energy policy bill through the General Assembly as drafted, Highland's board will be stripped of any land use controls it has, or plans to implement, with regard to 400-foot wind towers. All the suggestions for wind plant overlays or conditions on permits locally would be rendered null and void.

The draft legislation that outlines goals for Virginia energy usage and ways to implement them was reviewed last week by a special subcommittee. The most controversial is the document's call for identifying economically feasible sites for wind plants. Once those places get earmarked as good spots for projects, their landowners can erect utilities without any variances or permits from county officials, and without any regard for Highland's comprehensive land use plan.

Though many predicted this serious undermining of local control over the past several years, Highland supervisors, especially chairman Jerry Rexrode, continued to try to convince constituents it would never happen. The county can fight in Richmond for whatever it needs, Rexrode said. The county can put plenty of conditions on utility permits that prevent a proliferation of them, he assured us.

He was wrong.

This draft bill is nowhere near a vote in the legislature yet, and it's sure to meet with strong resistance from all local governments in Virginia, but you can bet something akin to it will eventually emerge. It may be a watered-down version, but when it comes, Highland will be at the top of the list as a great place for wind plants. And there won't be much, if anything, supervisors can do to stop them.

The proposal is depressing not just because it places such vital decisions into the hands of state officials who have never set foot in Highland, but because it would have been far easier to defend ourselves had our board turned down HNWD's permit request to begin with, instead of breaking all the rules on the books to allow it.

The overwhelming opposition here to desecrating our unique environment would have carried a whole lot more weight in Richmond if our board had supported rather than rejected the majority sentiment. Instead, lawmakers have the "official" assurance from our leadership that it will accept this kind of development, and residents and landowners opposed to such projects are left to explain why their voices were unheard.

Highland New Wind Development's proposal is but the first of many coming our way. If our board intends to continue to discount and discredit the majority view, all three members should resign and let a newly elected board in tune with its constituents fight to save the county from the rampant exploitation on its doorstep.

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