



Even in the winter when trees are bare and snow covers the peaks, the scenic beauty of the mountains is a remarkably significant symbol of the quality of life in the Highlands. Protecting ridge lines like these, seen from the top of Shenandoah Mountain in Highland County, is imperative. Maintaining our vistas from human structures that defile such a landscape is a top priority — one that requires local leaders and citizens to agree on how best to accomplish it without a serious loss of private property rights. Those reviewing comprehensive plans in both counties should be held accountable for this task, and put recommendations on the table for future ordinances that can strike the required balance. There is little about life in Bath and Highland that isn't associated with the mountains surrounding us — they define our environmental sensitivities, our culture, and our heritage. (Recorder file photo)

Protect that which defines us

Highland County, approaching from the east, is marked with a distinct welcome sign — the endless view from the crest of Shenandoah Mountain along U.S. 250.

Most anytime of day, but especially when the skies are clear, or at dusk or dawn when color is at its most intense, the continuous mountain ranges take one's breath away. Travelers into the county invariably pull over at the rest area and pause to take in the rich beauty of the Alleghenies as they spill out wave after wave to the western horizon. Even for those who have lived here for years, coming over and around the bend is a touchstone, bringing a sigh of relief and a renewed sense of wonder after a long day of grocery shopping, working, or otherwise navigating the frenetic pace of the world

beyond our borders.

This timeless panorama is created by the undisturbed ridge lines that define not only our county line, but the quality of our environment. Some of the mountain tops are protected under the umbrella of federal or state ownership. But most are the incredible back yards of private residents who tend by choice to leave them to Mother Nature. It is fortunate so many have left them unmarred. But, as we've all learned, there are forces at work that can spoil the natural tapestry that nurtures us. Cellular towers and industrial wind turbines which do their best work high above the valley elevations,

would in a moment change everything.

Members of Highland's comprehensive plan review committee took up ridge top protection recently, debating the merits of keeping the mountains clear of structures that forgo their beauty for man's needs. On one hand, there were those asking quite sincerely how a locality can offer such protection without trampling the rights of citizens to use their properties as they see fit. On the other hand were those who saw an overwhelming need to put something specific in place to encourage landowners to continue leaving ridge tops in view of all residents undeveloped.

This debate arose under a real threat to our ridges — the proposal for the state's first commercial wind energy facility planned atop our highest mountains to the west. It's a shame the discussion didn't come long before Highlanders found themselves at odds with a developer and landowner who does not believe his 18-20 towers standing 400 feet above the ridge line would be detrimental to our landscapes.

It may be late in the game, but the time has arrived to reach a consensus definition of our values and responsibilities as they relate to land use. Without that, we are surely facing a random unraveling of our natural heritage that will leave future generations shaking their heads in wonderment as to how that could have happened.

No matter how things shake out with the current proposal, it's not too late to decide, as a community, what we can do to protect these views that define us and lure increasing numbers of visitors who seek to share what too many of us take for granted. We hope the review committee has the grit to make these tough choices and keeps the county's majority viewpoint in mind as it deliberates.

As a part of its homework, the committee should investigate how other localities have written this kind of protection into their own land use plans and ordinances, and find a way to protect private property rights in balance. A good place to start is Rappahannock County which, with the support of native families and newcomers alike, has stopped in their tracks developers who would profit from the natural beauty there as they destroy it.

The mind-numbing process begun years ago by Highland New Wind Development's proposal to industrialize Red Oak Knob has worn down its opponents as it grinds through the courts and various state bureaucracies. But this is just one battle and there will be many more in the years ahead. Those who would protect our natural heritage will need staying power to a degree we cannot even yet imagine.