

Wind project hearings come to a close

RICHMOND — Bats and birds continued to be the main topic of discussion last week as testimony about Highland New Wind Development's proposed turbine utility concluded at the State Corporation Commission.

Expert witnesses for the company maintained their position that there simply was not enough evidence to show the 18-20 turbines atop Allegheny Mountain would threaten avian species.

Most of the back-and-forth between experts and attorneys centered on the environmental sensitivity of the site in Highland County, and little new information surfaced about what could be Virginia's first industrial wind energy facility.

Several Highland residents attended the evidentiary hearings, and reported witnesses on both sides of the debate did a solid job of laying out the pros and cons related to the project.

The hearings were the last major step in

the SCC's review of the proposal. HNWD must secure a certificate from the SCC to build and operate the plant, and state officials have proceeded with caution because the decision sets the stage for other similar projects that will come before them in Virginia.

SCC's three commissioners make the final decision. After reviewing all the evidence and citizen comment on the project, they can choose to approve HNWD's application as it stands, approve it with conditions, or deny it altogether.

Before the issue is in their hands, the SCC's hearing examiner, Alexander Skirpan Jr., will compile a report and recommendations summarizing the reams of information presented.

SCC information resources spokesman Ken Schrad says there could be a few more months ahead before a decision is reached.

"The hearing concluded last week (Nov. 16) and post-hearing briefs will be filed approximately 30 days after the transcript is com-

pleted," he said. "That most likely pushes the date for those briefs into January."

Post-hearing briefs can be filed by HNWD and the respondents in the case once they have a copy of the hearing transcript. All parties will also have an opportunity to file briefs in response to Skirpan's final report before it goes to the commissioners.

In the meantime, Highland residents wait anxiously. After more than four years of public discussion on the project, the decision will ultimately be made during the first half of 2008.

Editor's note: Once a transcript of the hearing testimony is complete, The Recorder will make it available to anyone interested in reading the experts' positions. For more on the debate, see the Oct. 27 issue of The Recorder, which contains a summary of the testimony filed prior to the start of the hearings.

— Anne Adams