

# Tale of two counties

Bath County has a golden opportunity to avoid or at least mitigate the social and political trauma that has wreaked havoc in neighboring Highland County stemming from the prospect of industrial scale wind energy development.

Officials here have been warned that wind developers will find Bath attractive if they believe its leaders are vulnerable. Now is the time to write language into the comprehensive plan that discourages such exploitation before it begins.

For five years, Highland County has had industrial wind energy as a source of anxiety, controversy, lawsuits, and debate. The idea of becoming home to Virginia's first commercial wind utility, replete with 18-20 towers standing some 400 feet above pristine ridge lines, has invaded every aspect of county governance and discussion about development in general related to our quality of life.

And it's far from over. It will be at least another couple of months before the State Corporation Commission in Richmond puts Highland New Wind Development LLC's permit request to a vote. If approved, there may be a long list of conditions attached which could mean many more months ahead before the company can erect its towers. And many more months ahead for those who spend years diligently spelling out their arguments opposing the project.

Meanwhile, renewable energy as a whole has started its steady rise to the top of Virginia's overall conversation on how best to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and the pollution attached to traditional sources of power. This year, legislation was passed to begin pulling together the Virginia Energy Plan. When the General Assembly convenes next year, a discussion about renewable portfolio standards is sure to be central; groups are already weighing in on possible mandates which would force utilities to purchase some percentage of their electricity from renewable sources like wind, solar, and biomass.

Bath County has been well-educated on the pros and cons of industrial wind energy. Its citizens have watched their northern neighbors struggle with the issue, and they've been wary of how it might affect their own back yards.

As Bath planner Miranda Redinger points out this week, the time to reach consensus on where citizens stand on wind generation is now. After attending a regional meeting on how land can be categorized as to its potential for wind development, Redinger told her planning commission Bath County ranks high on the list of places where wind turbines would find a good source of hometown breezes to turn their blades.

As The Recorder reported last year, Bath County has another asset attractive to such developers — federal and

state land. About half of all county property belongs to the government here, and as corporate interests become further entrenched and at odds with private citizens, public property looks ever more inviting. Especially if federal and state leaders need to be seen as being "green" among their voting constituents.

To her credit, Redinger is ringing the bell loud and clear — Bath County is not only not immune to the forces of wind, it's in fact one of the most likely places developers will seek in the coming years. Right now, as Bath citizens work through the specifics attached to their land use plan, adding a section on wind energy use is of paramount importance.

Highland County was urged to do the same by regional planners. It instead dismissed the warnings and is suffering the consequences. Highland has been left open to developers who saw there was nothing in its land use regulations to prevent the ridge winds from being harnessed. Supervisors were split on the issue. Citizens spent hundreds of thousands of dollars suing officials for approving a conditional use permit for Highland New Wind Development LLC, and the lawsuits will likely be taken all the way to the Supreme Court.

The longer Bath County ignores this issue, the more vulnerable it becomes as well. Never mind all the smart growth and good planning — this one kind of industry could cast a dark shadow over all the other promising developments Bath is starting to attract. Fortunately, it appears Bath's planners are prepared to take the right road to encourage big wind companies to find another place to land.

Bath can avoid all the trouble, but only if it acts now.