

Highland officials consider holding wind projects 5 years

BY JAMES JACENICH • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — “It’s in the best interest of the county to hold approval on any further requests for wind turbines in abeyance of five years,” said Highland County Planning Commission chairman Jim Cobb.

Cobb had previously indicated he wanted to find a way to resolve industrial wind utility discussions, and told members of the comprehensive plan review committee last Thursday this was his suggestion.

County officials have grappled with Highland New Wind Development’s proposal here for a 39-megawatt facility for more than four years — a project that received a local conditional use permit from supervisors. The company has an application pending for a permit from the State Corporation Commission to proceed with its plans. Highland residents have expressed deep concern more utilities will follow, especially since U.S. Wind Force’s Liberty Gap LLC has pursued a similar plant in neighboring Pendleton County, W.Va., that could potentially be extended into Highland.

All members except Don Hower and Janice Warner agreed with Cobb’s idea. County administrator Roberta Lambert and building official Jim Whitelaw abstained.

The comprehensive plan committee consists of the five planning commission members plus two representatives hand-picked by each planner. Membership was drawn from four regions of Highland County: McDowell, Mill Gap, Monterey and Blue Grass. Lambert and Whitelaw attend meetings on behalf of supervisors. At-large member Caroline Smith was selected for her experience with the previous comprehensive plan committee and at-large member Valerie Weber-Lowry was selected for her professional planning background.

Cobb, calling each member by name, asked if he or she agreed with his proposal to hold future wind turbine applications in abeyance for five years. One by one, members answered yes or no and a few elaborated on their decision.

“This is how I see it,” said Cobb. “We are told how much money we are going to get if (industrial wind utility development) is implemented. I am concerned ... (Hypothetically) Virginia may take X number of dollars out of the (HNWD) project. If it was sold to Florida Power and Light, the terms might be renegotiable. Highland County could end up on the short end of the stick.”

Cobb said waiting five years before allowing a second wind generation plant in the county would give local officials time to evaluate the impact of HNWD’s facility on the county.

It would also give voters time to decide if the current leadership is responding to their position, he explained. HNWD’s local permit was granted on a 2-1 vote of the three-member county board, and those opposed to their decision have often vowed not to re-elect supervisors Jerry Rexrode and Lee Blagg, who voted to grant it.

Cobb said citizens opposed to wind development might go to the polls in this November’s general election and choose supervisors who shared their view, and change current leadership.

While Cobb and fellow planners Doug Gutshall, Tony Stinnett, and Harry Sponaugle (Crysta Stanton was absent) agreed with Cobb’s strategy, there was some dissent among members of the committee.

Gutshall said the comprehensive plan committee should not take a stand on wind energy until the current project’s permit, which has been legally challenged, was settled in court, and the SCC had issued its decision.

“It is important to have other restrictions, because this is only a guide,” Hower said.

He believes the land use plan should describe under what conditions a wind facility might be acceptable, thereby restricting such utilities to certain areas of the county.

Lambert noted, “The zoning ordinance says this is what you can do, not what you can’t do.”

She told the committee a legal interpretation would be required to determine whether the county had the authority to postpone a decision in that fashion. Typically, those applying for permits or zoning do not have such a long time to wait for a county decision.

“We don’t have to have all the legal answers,” said Cobb. “We are stating what we believe should be the future of Highland County.”

County attorney Melissa Dowd declined to respond to legal questions from The Recorder this week, saying she was not allowed to discuss the issue with the newspaper without the permission of supervisors.

Lambert said she would wait to see a final draft of the proposal and then run it through legal channels for an opinion before she would comment further on the idea.

Board of supervisors chairman Robin Sullenberger, too, said he would have to look at the proposal in its final form before giving an opinion or allowing the county attorney to comment. “I am pleased that they are looking at the issues and trying to come up with reasonable solutions,” said Sullenberger. “I would like to see specifics and look at the rationale.”

Sullenberger said a joint work session between supervisors and the comprehensive plan committee has been proposed, as well as a joint hearing. Those are the times he expects to gain a clearer picture of the proposal and its ramifications. “We are just going to have to look at it and take specific factors into account and see where we go from there,” he said.

The land use chapter of the comprehensive plan will go through its initial review Tuesday, Feb. 20. That’s the soonest a draft version of Cobb’s proposal will be seen by the committee.