

# Are industrial wind turbines *substantially in accord* with the Highland County Comprehensive Plan?

An analysis of the Highland County Department of Building and Zoning staff report  
by John R. Sweet

The original text of the report is in Times Roman black.

JRS notes are in Arial and will also appear in red if this document is printed in color.

## CONFORMANCE WITH THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Planning Commission should consider the extent to which the proposed facility is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. Staff has identified the goals set out below. Planning Commission members or members of the public may identify additional Comprehensive Plan factors.

### Elements that may be in conformance are:

#### A. Government and Finance Goals;

1. Increase the County's financial resources.

This is speculative. The amount of tax money the county could receive is unknown, as is the offset due to possible reduction in property values and the number of people who might elect not to build on or improve their property or even buy property in the county due to the presence of industrial wind turbines.

#### B. Land Use Goals;

1. Ensure that effective land use planning is kept in balance with the freedom and rights of individual landowners.

Approval of the proposed project would protect the rights of one absentee land owner while seriously impinging on the rights of nearby residents and land owners to enjoy the peace and quiet that their lands have, to date, provided for them. It would also adversely affect the operation of a nearby business, the Bear Mountain Retreat.

#### C. Utilities Goals; These are Natural Environment Goals, not Utilities Goals.

1. Preserve and protect the atmospheric quality in the Highland County vicinity.

Air quality in the county would be slightly degraded during the construction phase but the project is not expected to have any impact on air quality over the long run. This project would not cause any reduction in the burning of coal for electrical generation.

2. Reduce potential environmental problems associated with Karst topography.

The project site is not a karst terrain. The project would not reduce (or increase) the environmental problems associated with karst.

3. Conserve the County's soil resources.

The project will degrade the soil resources on the project site. Extensive earth moving for road construction and site preparation will disturb large areas of soil. This is not a conservation project.

4. Protect local water resources and unique aquatic habitats.

Even if proper E&S controls are implemented, which is questionable, the construction of the project will have an impact on the Laurel Fork and associated wetlands. Laurel Fork is the only intact brook trout watershed in the county and is classed as Tier 3, Exceptional Waters.

**D. Economy Goals;**

1. Ensure that new business and industrial development occurs in suitable locations and is compatible with the County's environmental, scenic and rural character.

**The proposed project is the antithesis of every aspect of these goals. The Comprehensive Plan speaks of centralizing development in industrial parks, not placing industrial facilities on prominent ridge tops, which would maximize the scenic and rural degradation.**

**Elements that may conflict are:**

**A. Land Use;**

1. Maintain Highland's predominantly rural character.

**D. Economy Goals;**

1. Ensure that new business and industrial development occurs in suitable locations and is compatible with the County's environmental, scenic and rural character.

2. Property value consequences

**These are indeed goals that conflict with the proposed project. It is also in conflict with the Land Use Constraints Map, Figure X-1, page 171, in that the site is partially within and directly adjacent to the delineated Scenic Corridor. This map feature is associated with Economy Recommendation (j), page 89, "Continue to market the Staunton-to-Parkersburg Pike as a valuable historic, cultural, and economic asset for the county." Finally, read the section titled Land Use/Environmental Balance on page 7. The proposed project is in conflict with this whole paragraph.**

**STAFF ANALYSIS**

The Highland County Zoning Administrator has visited the site several times and attended all reviews and public hearings held on the prior application for the Conditional Use Permit for the proposed use of the property. The proposed site may be consistent with several goals of the Highland Comprehensive Plan as follows:

1. The area is relatively sparsely populated.

**But those residents have rights at least equal to those of an absentee land owner.**

2. The proposed site is adjacent to a major highway through the County.

**Which also happens to be a designated scenic corridor.**

3. The proposed site is adjacent to the existing 69 kV transmission line through the County.

4. The proposed site does not appear to contain karst topography.

5. The proposed site does not have slope prohibitions.

6. The proposed site is already in use as pasture land and deforestation will be minimal.

7. It is not evident that the proposed use of the property will be contrary to the existing surrounding land uses of agriculture and logging.

**An industrial site seems quite at odds with agriculture if not with logging and it is most certainly at odds with a neighboring established business, which puts it in conflict with**

the goal to “retain and expand existing businesses . . . ,” page 89, goal #2. It is also in direct conflict with goal #3 on page 89 as noted in D.1 above.

On the other hand, the proposed project has raised questions and issues of viewshed (there are occupied residences that will most likely have full view of the turbines when built), and the proposed project appears to be either in or very near a scenic corridor; noise (impact on residences, wildlife and livestock); other impacts on wildlife (endangered species as well as migratory birds and bats); possible impact on the watershed (construction run-off into Laurel Fork), and a potential impact on the otherwise rural nature of western Highland County.

**These are all true statements. Any serious consideration of them would clearly overshadow the few, minimal, positive aspects of this proposal.**

## CONCLUSIONS

The Comprehensive Plan clearly states that life in Highland County is a balance – a balance between economic and land use strategies and a balance between maintaining Highland’s rural and historic character and fending off economic stagnation. (Comprehensive Plan, page 5).

**This characterization seems to stem from a sentence at the bottom of column 1, page 5, “We see that unmanaged growth can degrade our natural environment and rural character, but that a lack of growth can mean a loss of economic opportunity and stagnation.” The ‘unmanaged growth’ part of this sentence seems to have been neglected. Siting an industrial facility in an agricultural zone in the most scenic part of the county is a textbook example of unmanaged or mismanaged growth. The Comprehensive Plan tries to prevent this type of abuse through Economy Goal 3, page 89, and Land Use Goals 1 and 3 and Recommendation (a), page 187, referred to above.**

The Utility section of the Comprehensive Plan does not suggest future sites for the location of public utilities. However, the Plan does suggest that generally development should occur where the utility service can be provided at “least cost.” Therefore, areas of existing electrical power are potential areas for development. (Comprehensive Plan, page 127). The proposed site is adjacent to the only kV transmission line in the County.

**The cited passage from the plan clearly refers to the provision of electricity, water, and sewer to proposed residential or commercial developments. It in no way relates to the siting of industrial utilities as the first sentence, above, states. The plan does not address industrial power plants in any way. It is unlikely that the framers of this plan ever dreamed of such a possibility.**

In the Natural Environment section of the Comprehensive Plan, the proposed project appears to meet three of the stated Goals of preserving and protecting atmospheric quality, reducing potential environmental problems associated with karst topography, and conserving the County’s soil resources. There would be no harmful emissions from the project. (Comprehensive Plan, page 163).

**True, there would be no harmful emissions except during construction but the project would in no way contribute to “conserving the County’s soil resources.” And here is this karst thing yet again. No karst terrain is involved so it would no more contribute to reducing problems with karst than it would to providing for a full range of housing (goal 1, page 39) or strengthening the recycling program (goal 5, page 61). This is a red herring.**

The proposed project would develop another economic asset for the County and increase the County's financial resources without requiring additional County services and infrastructure. One Goal in the Economic section of the Plan reiterates the desired balance between new business and industrial development and the preservation of the County's environmental, scenic, and rural character. (Comprehensive Plan, page 89).

**It might increase the county tax base but it might also erode that base. This is not known. The second sentence misstates goal 3, page 89, which does not speak of balance but simply states that "new business and industrial development occurs in suitable locations and is compatible with the County's environmental, scenic, and rural character." [emphasis added] The proposed site is in no way suitable for or compatible with an industrial facility.**

From a land use perspective, the proposed project is sited next to an existing kV transmission line. The development will be located on previously cleared land and clustered together on several acres. There is potential conflict in that the proposed project is located in or very near what is designated as a scenic corridor. (Comprehensive Plan, page 187 and Figure X-1).

**The existence of the 69 kV transmission line is a plus, as is the fact that the site is pastureland rather than forest. However, "clustered together on several acres" hardly describes a facility that would be distributed over 217 acres in an array that has not been disclosed by the applicant. The lack of a site plan is one more disqualifying aspect of this proposal as presented.**