

Down to the wire

Key wind development vote set for Monday

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — The first of two decisions on opening Highland County to commercial wind energy will be made Monday, and pressure on the county board from those opposing a power utility here is growing stronger.

Residents urged supervisors again this week to hold off on any decisions regarding Highland New Wind Development's plans to construct a 50-megawatt wind turbine plant on Allegheny Mountain.

Those attending asked whether they could make comments on the proposal during the board's regular public comment period. The idea was initially resisted by board chairman Jerry Rexrode, who said those types of comments should be made at the public hearing scheduled for the end of this month. But county attorney Melissa Dowd said in her opinion, public comment was public comment, and the board should agree to hear its constituents.

"There is more and more information coming forward (on wind energy issues)," said Blue Grass resident Nancy Witschey, after Rexrode agreed to hear what she had to say. "I urge you to consider a delay until we get more information. Can we at least give it more time?"

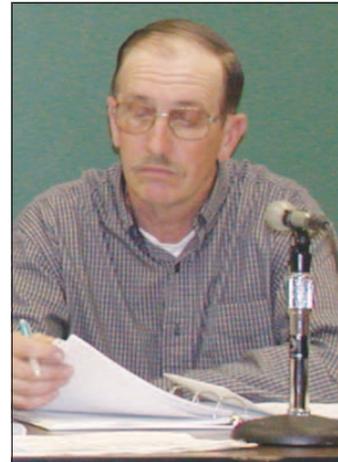
McDowell landowner Ken McGraw told the board land values will go down if the project is approved, a move he said would be counter-productive. He said he understood the board's concern about increasing county revenue, but felt this would do more damage than good. "It's a bad idea," he said. McGraw had spoken to a number of those here in the construction business, and said a wind project would drive away those considering relocating to Highland and ultimately hinder that industry. "I'm going to do anything I can to persuade you not to do it," he said.

Monterey resident Fran Davenport reminded the board the county's comprehensive plan was currently under review. "Making any kind of zoning change now is premature. Why not wait until that plan is finalized?" she said.

Supervisors later discussed a request from Hightown resident Carolyn Pohowsky made last month. Pohowsky personally requested the board hold an informational meeting to help bring the community together with its leaders

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on this issue. Rexrode and Blagg did not agree to hold one. The developer, H.T. "Mac" McBride, said his company would not participate in such a meeting. Supervisor Robin Sullenberger, however, agreed to consider a meeting with or without his colleagues.

Pohowsky told the board she believed a forum in which information could be exchanged, and citizens could learn more about the research the county has conducted on the issue would be "a very healing process for this community."

"I'm still gathering information," Rexrode replied. "We have a lot of information in board of supervisors' office anyone can read." As for scheduling a forum, Rexrode said, "I don't know at this time. I found out things today I still haven't had a chance to think about." Rexrode said anyone who wishes to see what the county has learned so far is welcome to look through the boxes of information in the county administrator's office.

Dowd added that she has advised the board on sharing its research. "It is important for the board to get on the record any information it considers in making a decision on a zoning amendment or a conditional use permit. I've urged the board to make sure they put forward, as part of the public hearing, the boxes and boxes of information in Roberta's office. The public is always welcome to give the board of supervisors any input in any way shape or form. If you have information, call Roberta. Put it in ... and ask that it be made part of the

record."

Resident Charlotte Stephenson said she believed the board was missing the point of Pohowsky's request. "This is an opportunity for the public to ask you questions and for you to respond to them," she said.

"I think you can do that any time," Rexrode replied.

"So you all are not willing (to hold a meeting)?" she asked.

"I'm not sure we have the answers you want to hear," Rexrode said.

Dowd told Stephenson, "If you're going to ask them how they're going to vote, I'm going to tell them to not open their mouths."

Several of those attending said they didn't intend to ask the board how it would vote, just to share information and ask questions about the research.

"Oh, you're going to ask how we're going to vote," said Blagg. Stephenson said no, but Blagg said, "Oh, give me a break." He invited her to call him anytime after dark and he'd be happy to discuss the issue. Blagg urged anyone with information on wind energy to share that with the board, stressing the supervisors were eager to learn everything they could.

When one person asked McBride whether he would participate, since there are many questions only the developer could answer, McBride said no.

"I think that's what the public hearing is for," Rexrode said. "We need to listen. I'm sure things will come out we hadn't thought of."

When the board was asked whether it planned to take a vote on the conditional use permit the day of the public hearing, Rexrode said he would not. He added he had already said publicly he didn't care for the looks of 400-foot turbines, but "research still needs to be done." Rexrode repeated his previous remark that there are others in the community who are not opposed to the wind facility project. Several in the audience asked who they were, and why they weren't coming forward. "They're your neighbors. They're your kin people. And in some cases, they're your wives," Rexrode said. "You haven't taken the time to ask them what they think."

Dowd put a stop to the exchange, and reminded the board it had no obligation to agree to Pohowsky's request, but could do whatever it wanted to do.

"If I choose to do this, and need to do it on my own and for my own information," Sullenberger asked, "will it still be part of the record?"

Dowd said anyone could tape record the meeting and then enter its content into the public record at the time of the hearing.

Sullenberger said he would not pressure his colleagues on the board to agree to a forum, and said he would probably not decide on the request until after Monday's vote on the zoning amendment request. "I'm not going to impose this on the other supervisors," he said.

Blagg said the perspective from his seat as a supervisor gives him a different view than from sitting in the audience. "I get a feeling ...

it's not a feeling, it's a fact — that a lot of people think we're the enemy," he said. "Whatever we decide, it's not going to make half the people happy. You have to trust the people you elect."

Ultimately, the board took no action on Pohowsky's request. Wednesday, Pohowsky said, "I didn't take that as a 'no.' I still think this is on the table. My biggest concern is exactly what we saw last night — the cynicism and lack of trust on both sides that's going to overshadow what this is all about. When we get past this, will we be able to recover?"

Pohowsky says there should be some way citizens can express their concerns to supervisors outside the formal board meeting context. The public comment period of meetings has a tangible apprehension. "It's the only opportunity people have to say what's been on their minds for a month, and there's all this pent-up passion and frustration," she said. "I understand their need for time limits, but I was really glad Jerry (Rexrode) allowed people to speak (Tuesday). That exchange was a healing step right there.

"If we're going to draw on the collective expertise and energy of this community, we've got to keep the channels of communication open."

The board will vote on the zoning amendment request Monday, Jan. 10 at 7:30 p.m. in the Highland Modular Conference Center.

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From left, H.T. McBride, his wife, Lola, and Mustoe resident John Sweet, at the Highland supervisors' meeting Tuesday, at which the board set a vote on McBride's wind project amendment for this Monday. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)