

# Planners urge wind awareness

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — After months of work on wind energy at the request of county supervisors, the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission officially put the ball directly into Highland's court last week.

CSPDC turned over all information and recommendations it has found to supervisors and planners, telling them the county ought to resolve where its community stands on wind energy development within its borders — starting now.

CSPDC senior planner Darryl Crawford presented planning commission members and supervisors with a 20-page list of things to consider should an application for conditional use permits or zoning changes from a wind energy developer be made now or in the future.

The CSPDC is beginning to revise data for Highland's comprehensive plan. "While we're doing research for the plan," Crawford told Highland officials, "you should go ahead and address where the county stands on wind." He read from the text of the CSPDC document, saying, "It has become evident over the last few years that Highland County has excellent wind resources. There may even be some economic value to the county and its citizens. At the request of the Highland County Board of Supervisors, our office has spent the last six months studying various issues related to wind energy development throughout the United States.

"Our research has been centered upon large-scale wind projects due to the possibility for such a project to be brought forward at some point. We have not examined small-scale wind other than to demonstrate the differences between 'small wind' and 'large wind,'" he said.

Facing the possibility of a permit request from Highland New Wind Development, LLC, a wind development company owned by the McBride family of Harrisonburg, supervisors had asked the CSPDC to assess the potential tax benefits. Crawford was lead researcher, and presented findings April 29 at an informational hearing in Monterey.

Crawford reminded planners last week that the SCC does not yet know how it will value turbines and may not decide until it's presented with an actual case. In any case, "revenue issues should be handled separately from land use," he said.

"From a land use standpoint, this is an im-

portant issue and can have effects for many years to come," Crawford continued. "We feel that it would be prudent for the Highland County Planning Commission and Highland County Board of Supervisors to work together with the community to draft a comprehensive plan amendment stating the county's position on wind energy development (small and large) in Highland.

"The comprehensive plan amendment should state clearly, and up front, if there are no circumstances under which large-scale wind energy development would be acceptable in Highland County. That way, potential developers will know to look elsewhere. This will save everyone involved lots of time, money, and effort," Crawford said.

"If there are one or more legitimate places in Highland County where large wind energy development would be acceptable, or even encouraged by the county, then those areas need to be identified through a set of appropriate criteria applied to limited wind development overlay zones."

Crawford urged the county to take steps to assess "community sentiment" toward wind energy before beginning the review process for the overall comprehensive plan. "Highland County faces many important long range planning issues and decisions, not just wind energy development. It would be unfortunate to have the overall plan update process to be dominated by this single issue," he said.

With that, Crawford touched on some of the things the county should require from a developer before an application for permits or rezoning is submitted. They include everything from state and federal reviews to balloon tests showing Highlanders how the landscape might look with something that tall on the ridges. Crawford mentioned elevation views of all proposed structures, vicinity maps showing how the project might be sited, and "any other information that may assist the commission and board into making an informed decision."

Crawford said, "Everything and the kitchen sink needs to be shown so you are very clear.

"You can cover up to about the tree line, but from there up, they are what they are. It is what it is," he said.

Removing inactive or inoperable turbines is a major issue, Crawford added, reminding planners if they grant a permit for a wind facility, it is to the landowner, not the operator of the plant. "If action is taken, it's with the landowner," he said.

Planners quipped about the number of hoops outlined by CSPDC for utility companies to jump through.

Crawford agreed it was a long list, and would be "very expensive" for a company to meet the requirements. Developers should pay for anything related to meeting these recommendations, he said. "We've done the research for six months, and that's not been cheap. We're handing this project off to you, but the applicant should be responsible for covering this information."

The final owners of wind plants tend to be "big companies with lots of attorneys" and the county should decide what it's willing to accept ahead of time. "It's not good to put them through this expense," he said, if they have no reasonable expectation of being granted a permit.

"I went extensive (with the recommendations) and I went strict. You can always work backward from these if you want. But we went as far as we could reasonably go to give you everything we could find to work with.

"There's one more thing," he added. "We feel from our research that a project committed to the community should be doing (these things) anyway."

Reading from the document, Crawford said, "We quoted the following by Thomas J. Shepstone, AICP, at the conclusion of our presentation at the April 29 wind energy forum: We are all capable of being NIMBYs. The task of zoning, however, is to take out that factor, not reinforce it. A good zoning ordinance administered properly considers impacts on adjacent properties, but balances those factors with rights of landowners and needs of the community. Zoning in the hands of officials only prepared to do what is popular quickly degenerates into meaningless rules where all decisions are political.

"The suggestions and recommendations listed herein are extensive, but we feel that they are achievable by a large-scale wind energy project committed to best practices. Compliance with these and other conditions that the county may consider imposing on a potential 'wind farm' project will be expensive for the applicants. It is of no benefit to anyone if applicants meeting the requirements cannot anticipate at least a reasonable opportunity to successfully garner approval for a conditional use permit.

"Again, we reiterate the need for the planning commission and board of supervisors to

draft an amendment to comprehensive plan, and possibly even zoning ordinance amendments, stating the county's position with regard to wind development in Highland. That may include no wind energy development at all (small or large), small wind only, or a combination of some small wind and a limited number of large wind facilities. It may include designating wind development zones and excluding certain zones/areas or simply setting a base level criteria. There are also community energy programs where turbines are installed to supply a percentage of a community's energy locally rather than selling the power on the grid. You may or may not choose to support something like that. In any event, we feel that it will be best for all involved to go ahead and determine what the playing field really looks like," he stated.

Crawford concluded, saying, "As requested, we have conducted a public forum on the findings of our research and we have delivered hard copies of our research materials on wind energy facilities and issues for review by the board, commission, and the public. By means of this letter, we are delivering our suggestions and recommendations to complete this research project."

He thanked county officials for the opportunity to assist. "It has been a real learning experience for all of us. We hope that we have been able to provide you with some guidance as you move forward."

Responding to questions from planners, Crawford advised the recommendations be put into the form of an ordinance. If a developer applies for a permit before then, "still let it be known that you're going to require these things ... While you're working on it, if anything comes forward, just tell them, 'This is what we're going to need.'"

After the county decides on a resolution "then start on the comprehensive plan," Crawford said. "You've got major land use issues we'd like to see you spend time on."

Planners discussed the need to take the next four weeks and absorb what Crawford had presented before discussing it at their next meeting June 24. Then, they said, a series of meetings could be held to allow them an opportunity to listen to county residents and discuss the details, followed by a public hearing.

*For a list of CSPDC's recommendations for wind development, see sidebar.*

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