

Industrial wind power?

Decide now

If there was ever a good example of why Highland County needs the expertise of the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission, look no further than the recommendations it presented to officials here last week. The document was full of useful information for planners and supervisors to consider if and when a developer approaches the county with a request for a permit to build and operate a wind power facility. It neatly epitomized the “no stone left unturned” approach that should be applied to all land use decisions in such a fragile environment as ours.

What CSPDC senior planner Darryl Crawford handed over was a clear road map to follow, supported by months of research into wind energy projects worldwide. It’s the kind of information that would have taken Highland’s planners far longer to compile, if they could have found the time to do it at all.

Crawford’s work drove home at least one point that was not lost on the planning commission: Finding out whether Highland will welcome wind energy on any scale, or at all, needs to be done now. The CSPDC is already compiling statistics the county will need to revise its comprehensive plan — the book that will guide planners, developers and residents for the next five years in land use decisions. If the county does not do its homework on the suitability of wind utilities before it undergoes the comprehensive plan review, Crawford says, wind will dominate the process, leaving many other major issues without the full attention they need.

He’s right about that. And his strong suggestion that Highland set up an amendment to its comprehensive plan — complete with a “zoning overlay” for the county — should be taken very seriously. The process of taking the pulse of the community on wind energy may be painful at times, and certainly time-consuming, but it needs to be done. With developers knocking on the door, and the whole state waiting to see how Highland County reacts to them, residents owe it to themselves and future generations to undergo a “public sentiment on the issue overlay” immediately.

Crawford has provided the tools — research, statistics, and now a complete set of conditions for planners to consider in

making permit decisions for this industry in Virginia. The Highland County Chamber of Commerce has provided residents with professional knowledge in-depth on topics that had not yet been addressed by the county, and it will perhaps continue to assist in planning more such public discussions.

It is The Recorder’s belief that the main objection to industrial-scale wind facilities in Highland is the likelihood they will proliferate. Let one in, and many, many more will likely follow until our ridges are dominated with the 400-foot turbines. The CSPDC offers suggestions on how to prevent that, like issuing permits with the condition that no new transmission lines, or upgrades to existing ones, will be allowed.

Many have suggested any wind utility should undergo the full weight of the National Environmental Policy Act review process preceding its construction. That, too, can be a requirement for developers, at their own expense. Furthermore, Crawford pointed out, if an application were to arrive at Highland’s local zoning office before residents have a chance to work through community discussions, these conditions can still be required by the county before a developer applies for a permit.

While the CSPDC conditions outlined in this week’s paper are extensive and thorough, they will do little to stave off wind power in the Alleghenies if the federal government pushes hard to upgrade and add transmission capacity through our area. And there is plenty of evidence that is likely to happen in some form. The energy bill currently stalled in Congress contains language allowing certain transmission regions to be determined and developed.

Those with a stake in Highland County must decide how they feel about large-scale utility development. They should not be reactionary. A proactive posture will be needed to determine and then protect what the county would like to see happen within its borders.

Planners are going to take a few weeks to think about the CSPDC’s advice and, hopefully, they will present an approach for constructive debate that will meet this goal by the time school starts this fall. It is crucial you let them know what you think.

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