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Wind plan moves ahead

By Reggie Ponder
The Daily Advance

Wednesday, May 11, 2011

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Members of the Pasquotank County Planning Board Wednesday quizzed a representative of the company planning a large wind turbine project in the Desert area about the positive and negative effects the project could have on the community.

A conditional use permit application for the Desert Wind Energy Project will go before the Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners June 7 at 3 p.m.

Two members of the public also had questions at the Planning Board Meeting Wednesday.

Albert Eure said he and his sons have a small farm in the county, and are trying to understand whether the project will help the county or hurt it.

"We're real concerned and we don't know what the future is, whether it's going to hurt some people or be a big benefit," Eure said.

Pasquotank Planning Director Shelley Cox said the county's ordinance addresses safety concerns that citizens might have.

Dennis Herring, who identified himself as a property owner on Mill Pond Road, said he had heard about a high incidence of cancer in areas where there are high intensity electric lines. He asked if that was true and if there would be high intensity lines as part of this project.

Cox said no power lines would be run toward Mill Pond Road as part of the wind project.

Craig Poff, a representative of Iberdrola, the company planning the wind project, said the turbines will be connected by underground lines to small overhead lines that will be similar to the overhead lines found on a typical residential street. The step-up to a higher voltage line will be in Perquimans County, he said.

No lines from the wind project run north toward Mill Pond Road, Poff said.

"What will be the benefits to the citizens?" Herring asked.

Specifically, he asked if the wind turbines will bring lower electric costs to local citizens.

Poff said there would not necessarily be a reduction in electric prices locally. But he compared the energy portfolio of a utility company to an investor's portfolio, and said having wind energy in a utility portfolio will give utilities some alternative to the "volatility" of fuel prices.

"What you have with wind energy is a stable fuel cost," Poff said. "The wind is always free. Wind energy will reduce volatility in the increases in price."

When Planning Board member James Fletcher said later in the meeting that he had heard that electricity generated by wind-powered

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plants is more expensive than the electricity being generated by coal-powered plants, Poff said that wind energy is competitive in price with the electricity generated by new coal plants.

But Poff acknowledged that wind-generated electricity is more expensive than electricity generated by an older, already permitted coal plant. He said it's similar to the way a new, fuel-efficient car is more expensive than an older model, gas-guzzling vehicle.

Most people understand the need for renewable energy, Poff said.

Planning Board member Hezekiah Brown asked if the company could provide "relief" for residents paying high electric rates.

Poff said the electric rates in Elizabeth City are "well beyond the control of anyone in this room."

But he added that state commerce officials had estimated an economic benefit to the state from the wind project of \$90 million to \$110 million a year. Much of that benefit will be in Pasquotank and Perquimans counties, he said.

Brown said he is concerned about the permanent jobs and whether any of them would go to Pasquotank County people.

"I would expect that some will," Poff said.

He said the project lifespan is 20-50 years. Right now the company is talking to College of The Albemarle and Elizabeth City State University about developing training programs for the technical jobs.

Brown said making sure some of the jobs are available to local people is "what I am concerned about."

He asked if the company is reaching out to the minority community.

Poff said the company is reaching out through COA and ECSU. He said it is in the company's best interests to have a good relationship with the community.

Herring also asked Poff about employment for local people.

Poff replied that the company already has hired local contractors to do clearing work for meteorological towers associated with the project and has hired surveyors from within the region. In addition, people working on the project are staying in local hotels, eating at local restaurants and patronizing other local businesses, he said.

Between 200 and 400 people will be employed for about a year in the construction of the project, Poff said.

The company will seek local suppliers for aggregate and other materials needed in construction, he said.

There will be 15-20 permanent jobs created by the project, which will be high-paying, technically oriented jobs, Poff said.

Planning Board member Charles Jordan said he hopes smaller farmers have been given a chance to participate in the project because they might appreciate the income from the turbine leases.

Poff said the company has held several meetings with landowners and began by inviting more than 100 landowners in the area.

Planning Board member William Kruse asked where the turbine components would be manufactured.

Poff said Gamesa plants in Pennsylvania will manufacture most parts of the turbines, with blades manufactured probably in South Dakota, New York or Iowa.

Concrete and steel will be sourced locally, he said. In addition, the company will develop a local supply chain for lubricants and other materials that are needed regularly, he said.

Fletcher asked how many turbines would be turning at one time and how much electricity would be produced at one time.

Poff said each turbine would be turning at least 70 percent of the time, but he said it would be impossible to say how many turbines would be turning at any one time.

At full capacity, the project will generate 300 megawatts of electricity in an hour, Poff said. The project should be able to produce enough

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electricity to power 55,000-70,000 homes, he said.

Answering a question from Fletcher about how the electricity would get to where it is needed, Poff said a company called PJM manages the grid along the East coast, and west to Chicago, and would make sure the electricity from the plant can be balanced with other power sources as needed.

Fletcher said he has other concerns related to property values, possible effect on aerial application of agricultural chemicals, and the extent to which tax-funded grants are supporting the project.

Poff said the company can be eligible for tax credits — but not grants — and he indicated that some aerial applicators are willing to work around turbines while others are not.

Contact Reggie Ponder at rponder@dailyadvance.com

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