

Board tables wind farm vote

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ROCK SPRINGS -- Like the wind the power will come from, the exact details of Tasco Engineering Inc.'s proposed wind farm on scenic White Mountain in southwest Wyoming are hard to discern.

The company is seeking a conditional use permit from the Sweetwater County Commission to build up to 237 wind turbines on top of White Mountain.

But if approved, the final total may be just 70 turbines, or 50, or 36, or some other number. The project could be built in one phase. Or two phases, or three phases.

The size of the turbines will be 1.5 megawatts, unless they decide to build bigger, 3-megawatt units.

The developer says he needs flexibility in determining the location and alignments of the turbines, but without viewshed restrictions.

The best winds, though, are on the rim of the mountain, where the turbines would be most visible. If the wind towers were moved west, they would be less visible, but would generate less power.

Which in the end doesn't matter, because the real placement of the turbines on top of the mountain -- and the amount of space between each unit -- will ultimately be determined by the manufacturer of the turbines. But only after the project is approved.

The county could determine setbacks for the turbines -- say, 110 feet from roads and project boundaries -- or it can wait for the state, or perhaps the Bureau of Land management, to set a standard sometime in the future.

Project costs could top \$170 million, or not -- and could trigger a review by the Wyoming Industrial Siting Council, or not. The project could bring hundreds of temporary construction jobs to the county, or maybe not so many.

Confused yet?

Toss into the mix the extreme views about wind power by some locals -- mostly as to whether wind turbines themselves are majestic, tourist-drawing creatures, or hideous, steel monsters that block the real beauty of southwest Wyoming -- and it's clear the wind hasn't settled a bit yet in the debate over wind power in Sweetwater County.

"It illustrates the issue ... that you are the first one in the tube and we're learning from your project as we go along," Commissioner Paula Wonnacott told Tasco President Gary Tassainer during a permit hearing on the company's White Mountain Wind Farm project Tuesday night.

"You can see our approach (to wind power) is evolving ... and I regret that you're sort of part of that," Wonnacott said. "I don't want to call you a guinea pig, but you are a guinea pig for us."

The country may be turning to green energy, but it's still unclear how much the mineral-rich Sweetwater County will embrace the new wind power technology, and if so, to what degree.

County officials have drafted new rules and regulations to handle how and where wind energy development is supposed to occur. But the commission is still grappling with the details, all the while trying to determine how best to ensure the county and its residents receive the maximum benefits from any wind power development, while also protecting the area's lifestyle and resources.

"This decision, once it's done, it's over, it's finished ... it's something (the commission) will have as their legacy, one way or the other," said commission Chairwoman Debby Boese.

"The decision we make will be critical ... and the mistakes we make could last forever, and so my position is to be very, very cautious and protective of our land," she said.

No vote yet

The commissioners tabled the important vote on the county's first substantial wind energy project after more than

four hours of public discussions at Rock Springs City Hall during the Tuesday night meeting.

Tasco Engineering Inc. of Lehi, Utah, is seeking a conditional use permit to expand its proposed White Mountain Wind Farm.

White Mountain is a popular recreation area northwest of Rock Springs and northeast of the city of Green River, just north of Interstate 80. The mountain is home to elk, deer, wild horses, sage grouse and other species and local landmark Pilot Butte.

Tasco has incorporated two limited liability companies -- Teton Wind and White Mountain Wind -- to develop the project.

The company was granted a conditional use permit from the county -- under the new wind farm regulations -- in the summer of 2008 to construct 36 wind turbines on top of White Mountain in the first phase of the project.

The project site consists of 13,180 acres and includes BLM land, state lands, and private lands owned by Anadarko and the Rock Springs Grazing Association. Grazing association members have firmly backed the proposed wind project.

Now, Tasco is seeking a second conditional use permit from the county to construct a larger project on the mountain, which includes a possible maximum build-out of 237 turbines.

About 70 of the turbines are to be located on federal lands. The BLM is conducting an environmental assessment of those turbines that is due later this summer.

Tassainer told commissioners that he needs a decision on the permitting soon if the project is to go forward on a larger scale. If not, then the White Mountain Wind Farm would most likely include just the 36 turbines already permitted by the county.

"I can't wait another 10 months to get this approved (after 10 years of work on the project) ... I need to build this project next year," Tassainer said.

The developer made it clear that any kind of restriction that would place limits on the viewshed from Rock Springs would pretty much be a deal-breaker for the project.

"If we have no-view impediments from (Rock Springs) or any site ... then this project is dead," he said.

"I can't hide these 400-foot units, and there will be visual implications," Tassainer said. "But to not just see them from Rock Springs .. I just can't do that unless we go back to the 36 (wind turbine) regime."

The site is ideal for wind power, Tassainer said, because of its high location, high wind energy potential, willing and supportive property owners to lease land from, and the close proximity of a power transmission line.

But he said the company needs some flexibility in where and how many turbines will be placed, because it's the norm in the industry that the manufacturer of the towers lays out the design of any given project.

Tassainer said even though the company is seeking a permit for 237 turbines, the manufacturer will "determine the best layout to meet (optimum) energy production."

If the larger, 3-megawatt turbines are used, there will be fewer turbines placed within the project site. "There would be considerably more output, but the turbines would be spaced wider and farther apart," he said.

A full build-out project would have a lot of benefits for the county over the 20-year life of the construction project, Tassainer said, including an estimated \$55 million in property tax revenues, \$81 million in job earnings revenue locally, and more than \$500,000 in sales and use tax.

It would create about 187 temporary jobs during construction and 81 permanent workers, according to company projections.

Good, or bad

But the three-member commission was reluctant to make such a far-reaching decision at the meeting's end, despite a recommendation to approve the project -- with 29 conditions and stipulations -- from the county's Planning and Zoning Commission, and with the developer's contention that time is of the essence.

Commissioners said they wanted to be "very, very careful" and review all of the information presented during the formal public hearing before making a decision.

"I know we must be extremely careful ... to do everything at the front end of (wind farm development) to protect and ensure the future of the county," said Commissioner Paula Wonnacott.

"I'm not comfortable making an up or down, or temporary decision tonight," she said. "You'll get our response in a timely manner."

Commissioners said they were particularly concerned about the impacts to the viewshed on Rock Springs from several hundred wind turbines being constructed on White Mountain. And they were troubled with the Planning and Zoning Commission's lack of a recommendation for possible viewshed restrictions on the final placement of the turbines.

All three commissioners said the visual impact to Rock Springs constituted the overwhelming concern in comments they heard from people about the wind farm project.

"The one consistent message from our constituents was ... we don't want to see them from town," Wonnacott said.

But more than half of some 20 people who spoke Tuesday night favored the wind project, saying it would bring much-needed jobs to the area in tough economic times and help the nation reduce its reliance on foreign oil through the use of an environmentally friendly alternative energy source.

"Wind farms are something this county needs financially ... and something to be proud of," said Rock Springs resident Tom Gangnon.

"This project won't hurt recreation at all on White Mountain ... and it won't hurt our views," he said. "Those wind turbines are a majestic thing"

But Jeff Wright called the project "a bunch of baloney" and urged people to drive west on I-80 to Uinta County's Bridger Valley -- the site of two other Tasco wind energy projects -- to see what wind turbines do to the views.

"You used to look up and see those Uinta Mountains ... now it's a stinking mess of wind towers," he said.

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