

Permits still required for towers on Casper Mountain

County eases some wind regulations

By TOM MORTON - Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Friday, November 20, 2009 12:00 am |

People living in certain remote areas of Natrona County will be able to erect taller domestic wind turbines after the county commission approved changes in regulations Tuesday.

However, Casper Mountain residents still will need to go through a public hearing process if they want to erect a tower and turbine, said Gene Wallace of the county's development department.

A year ago, the commission approved regulations allowing domestic turbines, known as "small wind energy systems," in a variety of zoning districts, Wallace said Wednesday.

Towers -- only with a maximum height of 45 feet -- in those areas fell under the category of a "permitted use," meaning residents could erect them after obtaining the necessary building and related permits.

Those who have wanted towers sometimes have met resistance from their neighbors, who have said the towers and turbines would affect their views of the mountain and the plains.

But some county residents have lots of land and few neighbors, and the development department wanted to accommodate them, Wallace said. "We are delineating three zoning districts, which are characteristically more remote and have larger lot sizes."

The new regulations allow towers up to 100 feet tall -- not counting the additional height of the turbine blades -- in the Ranching, Agricultural and Mining (RAM), Urban Agricultural (UA), and Use Control Area (UCA) zoning districts, Wallace said. The only Use Control Area in Natrona County is the site of Chevron Global Power's 11-turbine commercial wind farm northeast of Evansville.

These towers must have a "clear zone" in which the tip of the lowest blade is 40 feet above the ground, Wallace said.

Residents in the three zoning districts who want taller towers for a total height -- including the vertical height of the blades -- up to 198 feet must apply for conditional use permits requiring public hearings, he said.

The 198-foot maximum is two feet shy of the threshold at which regulations for commercial wind projects take effect, including Federal Aviation Administration requirements for lighting the towers, he said.

Properties in the Ranching, Agricultural and Mining zoned districts have minimum lot sizes of 35 acres. Urban Agriculture lots are at least 10 acres, Wallace said.

The modified regulations approved by the commissioners also allow for new colors for the towers and the blades. Those colors are white, off-white, gray, and earth tones of tan, green and brown.

The new regulations do not change permitted use procedures in any other zoning district in the county, Wallace said.

Likewise, those living in Mountain Residential One (MR-1) and Mountain Residential Two (MR-2) must still obtain conditional use permits, which require county commission approval after public hearings, Wallace said.

MR-1 includes the face of Casper Mountain from Hat Six Road to Goose Egg, and MR-2 includes the top of the mountain.

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