

County's wind regs need more work

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Proposed revisions for commercial wind energy projects will receive more revisions themselves, according to the Natrona County Planning and Zoning Commission.

The commission tabled a request to amend temporary commercial wind farm regulations on Tuesday because the volume of comments made it impossible to rework the revisions in one night, commission Chairwoman Roxy Skogen said.

The new regulations will not affect Chevron Global Power's construction of an 11-turbine commercial wind farm on the former Texaco refinery site northeast of Evansville, because the Natrona County Commission has already approved those conditional use permits, Skogen said.

During the next two months, the Natrona County Development Department's staff will rework the regulations and present them to the five-member Planning and Zoning Commission on June 9. If adopted, the commission will send them to the Natrona County Commission for final approval, she said.

The temporary emergency wind regulations adopted in September are set to expire May 20, but Skogen doubted anyone will erect a commercial wind farm from then until the adoption of the new rules later in June.

The proposed and now-tabled regulations arose after several residents living near the Texaco property noticed the buffer zones surrounding the towers overlapped into their properties.

Resident Stan Mundy, who lives on East Lake Drive, also saw an apparent contradiction in the rules: One paragraph in the emergency regulations stated turbines must be set back at least a quarter-mile away from any primary structure such as a residence, while another stated the buffers must be a half-mile if the primary building is in certain zoning districts.

Other comments and criticisms also arrived, so the commission decided to revisit the amended rules.

During the public comment period Tuesday, a Cheyenne lawyer representing residents near the wind farm and residents themselves said the amended regulations did not adequately address the concerns about the buffer zones and noise issues.

"The noise never goes away," attorney Michael McGrady said.

If turbines are too close to people, the noise can cause sleep disturbances, McGrady added.

The BNSF railroad tracks intersect the roads leading to many of these residences, he said.

If trains block those entrances during a medical emergency, the Wyoming Medical Center would need to send its Life Flight helicopter instead of a ground ambulance, McGrady said.

However, the wind turbines could cause air disturbances dangerous for helicopters, he said.

Because of these and other problems, McGrady said the Planning and Zoning Commission should require half-mile buffer zones around the turbines.

Resident Ernest Linton said he wants to give his daughter three of his acres to build a house, and wondered what that location would mean for liability issues. "The insurance company is checking on this."

Robert Shade told the Planning and Zoning Commission his daughter has epilepsy.

When the sun is behind the turbines, the rotating blades create a strobing effect that can cause her seizures, Shade said, adding he's contemplating selling his house so she won't be near them.

However, representatives of energy companies objected to the proposed commercial wind regulations for different reasons.

PacifiCorp, doing business in Wyoming as Rocky Mountain Power, has wind energy projects in Wyoming but is not directly involved with the Global Chevron wind farm.

But without more revisions, the county's regulations could affect future wind projects, said Mary Throne, a Cheyenne attorney representing PacifiCorp.

The Planning and Zoning Commission has addressed some of PacifiCorp's concerns, Throne said, adding state and federal regulations also affect wind power, such as Wyoming's Industrial Siting Act.

"Our focus is practical," she said.

Some of the language in the amended regulations was vague, such as wording addressing "visual degradation," she said.

Other language was too rigid, such specifying how long a turbine can be inactive before the county declares it should be removed, she said.

PacifiCorp spokesman Jeff Hymas declined to address any of the specific proposed regulations such as the residents' concerns about buffer zones around turbines, he said in an interview from Salt Lake City.

But some of them could create larger obstacles for regulated utilities such as PacifiCorp than for unregulated wind energy projects, Hymas said.

"We think it's important that regulations are fair to wind energy developers and residents," he said.

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