

Wind farm construction to begin in May

by Carol Crump, Casper Journal
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The Chevron Global Power wind farm on the former Texaco refinery site just east of Evansville is a go.

By December, the 11 turbines spread across 880 acres will be generating enough electricity to power 400 homes.

The conditional use permits and variances necessary to move the project forward were approved by the Natrona County Commission on Feb. 3. Commissioner Matt Keating was the sole dissenting vote.

Construction will begin in May for a project that will take advantage of Wyoming's wind resource, which Chevron Global Power's Bill Reese said is the seventh best in the nation. The wind farm also will be the first in Natrona County.

Supporters of the wind farm outnumbered opponents speaking at the public hearing held by the Natrona County Commission. Proponents included some neighbors, the Casper Area Chamber of Commerce and Casper College, which is putting together a renewable energy program that could provide a workforce for the wind farm.

"We've installed thousands of these," said Mark Wilson, construction manager at the local office of TIC-The Industrial Company Wyoming Inc. "They're safe, quiet, clean."

The first local beneficiary of the Chevron project already has been hired. Chris Buchholz, who spent the last 17 years working elsewhere working on construction projects, has returned to Casper with his family to be operations and maintenance manager of the site.

"This project we see as a win-win," said Evansville Mayor Phil Hinds. "The town has been to several meetings. There were no negative comments from our citizens."

Complaints from residents

The reuse of the north portion of the former refinery was not supported by most of the neighbors to the north. The most vocal opponent, Stan Mundy, went door-to-door to put together a petition with 114 signatures against the wind farm. He said 90 percent of his neighbors signed.

"It should be away from people," Mundy said.

According to the regulations passed by the county in anticipation of wind farm development, a wind turbine tower is required to have a buffer zone with radii that are 10 percent taller than the tower.

In the case of the 400-foot-tall Chevron towers, the radii of the circle around each one would have to be 440 feet. Each tower also must be sited one-quarter mile from any structure.

The edge of Mundy's 53 acres on Lake Drive about the wind farm's boundaries and the buffer zone from one of the towers extends outside the Chevron property onto his land.

His house, the only primary structure on the property, is situated outside the required one-quarter mile radius. At the public hearing, Mundy told the commissioners the required buffer zone would limit his land use and devalue his property.

"I can't build on that property," he said. "You're taking land away from me that I could use."

Research into the county's new wind farm regulations eased Mundy's concerns about land use, according to County Planner Blair Leist. The Chevron project was the county's first opportunity to see how the regulations that were modeled after Platte County's regulations would work.

Under the rules for the urban agricultural district that Mundy's property is in, Leist said Mundy already could build a barn or a secondary structure anywhere on the acreage.

If he were to subdivide his property into 10-acre lots through the county planning process, Mundy also would be free to build another house on each of those lots, including the lot that included the buffer zone.

Mundy would be precluded from suing Chevron for any nuisance he thought the buffer zone might cause to the new home, since the tower would already in place.

Mundy is even less happy than he was last week about the project. The big issue is still that the wind farm will be in his backyard, even though the county "back pedaled on the buffer zone," he said.

"I had held out hope that the county commissioners would care about the people most affected," those that voted for them, not Chevron Texaco, Mundy said. "They didn't do their homework; the whole deal was pretty hokey."

Mundy's first political involvement was with opposition to the wind farm. With three county commission seats up for election in 2010, he's considering a run for one of the seats currently occupied by commissioners Barb Peryam, Rob Hendry and Terry Wingerter.

Part of the government worker's platform will be a commitment to give half his salary as a commissioner to Central Wyoming Hospice. His decision is to forego some of the job's compensation is a response to the halfway effort he believes all of the commissioners except Keating made to the wind farm's issues.

"Do a half-ass job, get half the salary," Mundy said.