

Opinions Vary at Hearing on Wind Farm Advisory Note

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People testifying in a hearing Wednesday on a possible Antelope Ridge Farm advisory vote offered some differing opinions.

The Union County Board of Commissioners is considering polling the public on whether the board should take a position for or against the proposed wind farm, a 300-megawatt facility Horizon Wind Energy wants to build in the Craig Mountain area near Union.

During the hearing, 27 people offered comment, with 15 saying there should be no advisory vote, and 12 saying they wanted it.

"I thought the hearing went well," said County Commissioner Mark Davidson. "I was pleased that everybody was pleasant and courteous even though there were a large number of people with different opinions."

If there were an advisory vote on the controversial issue this November, it would be the second of its kind in recent times. In 2008, the county went to the ballot box to get direction from the public on the purchase of land for the Mount Emily Recreation Area.

People voted in the affirmative, and the county went ahead with the deal. But in the Mount Emily purchase the county was the deciding authority.

In the case of Antelope Ridge, approval of Horizon's site certificate application rests with the state Energy Facility Siting Council. That was pointed out by many who testified against an advisory vote, including North Powder resident Kent Shroyer.

"It's a waste since it's non-binding," Shroyer said.

Those supporting the advisory vote proposal mainly said local residents should have a voice, even though the county is not the deciding authority.

Vote supporters included Dennis Wilkinson, head of the local anti-wind farm group, Friends of the Grande Ronde Valley.

"We definitely want it on the ballot. It's the only opportunity to find out the mandate of the people," Wilkinson said.

Those against placing the question on the ballot included Doug Lewis, vice-chair of the newly-formed, pro-wind farm group, For Our Rural Oregon. He said the state process should be allowed to run its course.

“There are 16 different siting standards, a vast amount of information will be reviewed, and there will be public hearings. I think the vote is a total waste of time and the commissioners need to keep it off the ballot,” he said.

At least one person testifying said he thinks an advisory vote might have some impact in EFSC’s decision.

“The county is an adviser to EFSC and its opinion will carry weight,” said Stephen Donnell.

Ahead of the hearing, the county board distributed copies of two drafts of the ballot question.

The question reads the same on both drafts: “Shall the Union County Board of Commissioners support the Antelope Ridge Wind Farm Application?” The drafts differ, however, in the accompanying explanations.

One draft says a “yes” vote will result in the board submitting a formal position supporting the application, and a no vote will result in the county opposing it.

The other draft says a yes vote will result in the commissioners taking up a position of support; it does not say the board would submit a statement of opposition in the event of a “no” vote.

John Milbert, a vocal opponent of the wind farm proposal and also of Idaho Power’s efforts to build the Boardman to Hemingway transmission line through Union County, said he wants a vote, and considers the second draft offensive.

“To even suggest it is an insult,” he said.

At the outset of the hearing, Board Chair Mark Davidson asked that people limit comments to the advisory vote proposal. Some participants used the occasion to speak either for or against the wind farm.

Tony Peterson, a member of the board of For Our Rural Oregon, was one of several who pointed to the economic benefits wind farm construction would bring.

“I’m a local business owner and sometimes I have up to 40 people working for me,” he said. “Economic growth in the county is in the toilet right now. I’m struggling to keep people working,” he said.

Shane Kirkland, site manager for Horizon’s Elkhorn Valley Wind Farm at Telocaset, also was among those touting economic benefits.

“I’m opposed to both drafts. It (wind energy) is good for the county,” he said.

Caroline Barnes was one of several taking an opposing view.

“I believe the county can and should make better choices for long term benefits,” Barnes said.

Michael O’Connor, a candidate this year for Union County commissioner, noted that some people at the hearing termed the proposed vote a waste of taxpayer’s money.

He asked the board about the cost of putting the question on the ballot. Davidson said cost would be negligible.

The hearing on the advisory vote will resume Aug. 18. In the meantime, the county board will accept written testimony.

After all testimony is in, the board will decide whether to put the question on the ballot. The filing deadline is Sept. 2.