

Residents speak out against wind farm

By Eric Eyre

ericeyre@wvgazette.com

More than 700 Greenbrier County residents have sent letters to the state Public Service Commission, opposing a plan to build one of the largest wind-power projects east of the Mississippi River.

The residents say the wind turbines will spoil mountain views, decrease property values, kill bats and birds, hurt tourism and ruin hunting and fishing in the area. They predict the wind turbines will catch fire during lightning strikes. And they say the turbines will interfere with emergency radio communications.

Wind project opponents want the Public Service Commission to schedule public hearings in Greenbrier County, not Charleston.

"These things are going to be 100 feet taller than the state Capitol building in Charleston. Just imagine pounding in 124 Capitol domes over 15 miles," said Dave Buhrman, spokesman for Mountain Communities for Responsible Energy, a group opposing the project. "It's bound to change what was wild and wonderful about our mountains."

On Nov. 1, Chicago-based Invenergy asked the Public Service Commission for permission to build 124 electricity-generating wind turbines on 500 acres in northwestern Greenbrier County. The 186-megawatt project would produce enough electricity for about 50,000 homes. The \$300 million project, called the Beech Ridge Wind Farm, would be about three times the size of the state's only existing wind energy project in Tucker County.

Dave Groberg, senior development manager with Invenergy, said Tuesday that project opponents have spread "inaccurate statements, misrepresentations and false accusations."

"I have to do a better job of getting the truth out there," said Groberg, who also spoke at a Greenbrier County Commission meeting Tuesday. "This [criticism] is just coming from a vocal minority. There's a silent majority of people out there who think this is a great idea."

During the past three weeks, the Public Service Commission has received only two letters supporting the wind project, which will provide 20 full-time jobs and pump about \$400,000 in tax revenue into Greenbrier County.

Some of the opposition letters were clipped from a Mountain Communities for Responsible Energy newspaper advertisement titled, "Whoa! Stop the rush to wind turbines." Other Greenbrier residents sent in hand-written and typed letters.

A Lewisburg woman suggested it would make more sense to put wind turbines in the ocean or atop a coal company's mountaintop removal site.

"If it is a must that wind energy turbines be placed in West Virginia, then why not choose the mountaintops removed by Massey Energy and other local coal operators?" wrote Lynn Hutchinson.

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Several residents predicted the wind project would cripple two annual fundraisers: a "bear dinner" and "ramp supper" sponsored by Williamsburg community groups. The wind project, opponents said, would decimate the bear population and damage wild ramps harvested in the mountains.

Other residents fear that "scenic mountain vistas" would be destroyed by "unsightly industrial wind factories."

"Please do not take away what God has given freely," wrote Rosa Owens of Renick. "This just cannot be done."

Another woman said the wind turbines would be too close to mountain cemeteries: "People should not have to be exposed to these structures while visiting the final resting place of loved ones," wrote Ireta Johnson of Lewisburg.

Groberg responded to the criticism during the Greenbrier Commission meeting. He said the wind farm won't hurt tourism, and may, in fact, attract more tourists to Greenbrier County.

"The Tucker County Convention and Visitors Bureau clearly doesn't believe that a wind project is bad for tourism or for its economy because they've put a wind turbine front and center on the cover of the visitors guide it distributes when promoting tourism in the area," Groberg said. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

The Public Service Commission has five months to decide whether to give a permit for the wind project. Public hearings are expected in January or February.

Invenergy hopes to start construction next summer, and the wind turbines would begin generating electricity as early as 2007, if the Public Service Commission approves the proposal.

To contact staff writer Eric Eyre, use e-mail or call 348-4869.