

'The Hills Are Alive'... with the sound of windmills?

MOUNTAIN MESSEN
FRONT PAGE
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(PHOTO OF
MEETING
WITH
THIS
ARTICLE)

By David Cottrill

Over 200 Greenbrier County residents looked on as concerned citizens exchanged views in Williamsburg's Community Center Tuesday with an official from the corporation that intends to construct as many as 131 wind turbines on the county's northwest ridges.

Addressing citizen concerns, David Groberg, project developer for Invenergy Wind LLC of Chicago, said the company would attempt to keep the giants a distance of one mile from any given residence. He said noise and strobe lighting effect (a sunrise and sunset phenomenon) would not be issues at that distance.

He also maintained that customary access to the area for hunting, berry-picking, etc., would not be curtailed by his company. The land is owned by MeadWestvaco; they determine access.

He said the wind factory would occupy 500 acres and that each tower requires a "footprint" that occupies a circle with a 130-foot radius.

He claimed economic benefits for the area, including temporary construction jobs during the 6-8 month erection period, and 10-20 permanent jobs paying around \$35,000 with benefits, and that Invenergy would be one of the top five tax payers in the county.

Groberg promoted the virtues of wind energy: no waste or pollution. He said his company has the resources to build and operate the facility over its lifetime (about 20 years), and that the company would either retrofit or take down the towers when the time came, and would post bonds to that effect.

Groberg invited attendees to "go and see a wind farm for yourselves" to judge its nuisance factors.

County resident John Stroud, whose property abuts the proposed project, spoke for Mountain Communities for Responsible Energy (MCRE). "They're not building it to provide green energy," he charged, "they're building it primarily for the tax subsidies.

"Properties that we own are taxed at 60 percent of assessed value. In 2001, the State Legislature gave away the cookie jar. The wind company will pay taxes on five percent of assessed value."

He said the company claims it will pay the county an average of \$400,000 a year over 20 years. He noted that the county assessor's office said it would

be closer to \$235,000. "It would be \$3.5 million annually if they were taxed the way we are," Stroud insisted. He said that was an important consideration in light of the county's current efforts to raise money for new schools.

Another financial windfall for the company would be its opportunity to sell green credits. Area resident Aaron DeHaven said reduced pollution (as in wind energy) is a commodity that can be ex-

changed. Another industry or utility can buy green credits to help meet environmental standards.

Utilities or factories buy them so they don't have to completely meet environmental regulations. DeHaven said he suspects the wind company will use green credits as part of their land lease agreement with MeadWestvaco, which would allow the paper company to "pollute even more." Groberg
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denied his company would exchange green credits with Westvaco.

A real estate appraiser conjectured that land values in the vicinity of the project would decline significantly. He projected that tourism would suffer. He noted that all of the area's tourism promotion literature touts the county's viewsheds. "People won't come here to look at an industrial site," he assured.

Many present were concerned about the effects of the turbines on wildlife and hunting. "Turkeys and bears are affected by the noise," Stroud observed. "Deer are probably not." He claimed that two endangered bat species (insect eaters) have been seen in the region even though Groberg claimed that company studies have found none. The windmills are known to kill numerous bats.

Although Groberg held that noise would not be a problem due to the one-mile setback of the towers, one attendee pointed out that they really wouldn't know for sure until the turbines are in place and operating. "These hollows don't diffuse noise," he contended, "they amplify it."

Another attendee said this whole debate would be academic if, after the towers are built, their low-frequency noise interferes with the Green Bank Observatory. "They'll shut you right down," he claimed.

European nations are backing away from wind power, Stroud pointed out, because wind farms are proving inefficient and expensive. He said there is an abundance of information on the Web about the problems European countries have encountered.

At a Williamsburg Ruritan meeting the previous evening, MCRE showed a video about quality of life issues experienced by residents living near

State Senator Jesse Guills and Delegate Ray Canterbury said they were there to look at both sides of the issue, as was Delegate Tom Campbell, who added, "I'll make sure your concerns are heard." No County Commissioners were present.

Since there is no zoning in the county, Stroud said, the only hurdle Invenergy has to negotiate is the state's Public Service Commission, a body of three, appointed by the governor for six-year terms.

towers at two projects in other states. The continuous noise and strobe light effects caused sleeplessness, nervousness, irritability, and steep declines in property values, they testified.