

By Leslie Lane

Refusing to take sides in the controversy emerging over a proposed wind farm, the Greenbrier County Commission heard comments from company officials and opponents of the plan on Tuesday, but took no action.

Commissioner Brad Tuckwiller said he understands it is an emotional issue for the citizens. He asserted, however, the governing body does not have any say in approval or disapproval of the proposal.

Invenergy, the company developing the Beech Ridge Wind Farm, intends to spread its turbines across 15 miles and 500 acres of land in rural Greenbrier County.

The property in question is primarily owned by MeadWestvaco Corporation.

Invenergy's application for approval of the 124-turbine wind farm was sent to the West Virginia Public Service Commission on November 1. The PSC has up to 270 days to render its decision on the company's proposal.

During Tuesday's commission meeting, several citizens voiced their concern about the turbines, and one noted 700 letters of opposition have been forwarded to the PSC regarding Invenergy's application.

The citizens, who are members of Mountain Communities for Responsible Energy, shared their worries about the ramifications such a development will have in Greenbrier County.

David Buhrman said the turbines, which according to information supplied by the company will range in height from 330 feet to 495 feet, "will become the new focal point for miles around."

He referred to the often used "wild and wonderful" slogan, and told the commissioners the proliferation of wind turbines will have a negative effect on tourism.

"Industry weary tourists have flocked to our state for the mountains majesty, wildlife and natural beauty, free from the stamp of industrialization," Buhrman commented. "If the wind industry's plan for the entire Allegheny Front is to pound giant metal towers onto the tops of all our tallest ridges we should be aware that our state will lose its wild flavor..."

"West Virginia has a long history of serving our nation's energy needs while still managing to keep some of its scenic beauty intact," he asserted. "We should reject the argument that everything must be 'useful' and that every place and every aspect of life should be commercialized, because at this point, we are putting Greenbrier County's future economic potential at risk by allowing the wind industry access to our loftiest vistas."

In addition to being detrimental to tourism, opponents asserted the wind farm will cause property values in the surrounding areas to fall.

They also cited the potential effect of such a development on wildlife and natural habitats.

Michael Rosolina referred to an article in the Division of Natural Resources publication West Virginia Wildlife about the Cold Knob Scenic Area.

The article highlighted the abundant variety of animals that can be seen there, and advised potential visitors, "This is a natural area with no facilities."

Rosolina said suggestions have been made that the turbines will be a tourist draw.

"People may come and see them once," he commented, but cautioned, "They won't keep coming back for the industrial landscape."

David Groberg, manager of business development for Invenergy, responded to some of the comments while also making a pitch for the project.

He said the company has experience in the wind farm field, noting it has more than 25 projects in various stages of development in the U.S. and Canada.

He pointed out the Greenbrier County project will pay an estimated \$400,000 annually in local taxes and an additional \$200,000 per year to the state.

Groberg also touted the jobs the project will bring to this area.

He said the company plans on using as much local labor as possible for the 200 construction jobs the project will create.

The 20 full-time positions needed for ongoing operation of the wind farm will be skilled positions that require specialized training, he advised.

Addressing concerns about the effect on property values, he noted the company has agreed to keep all of its turbines at least one mile away from homes in the surrounding areas.

"We've done our best to be sensitive to the residents of this rural area," Groberg stated.

He pointed out the project is subject to regulation by the PSC and told those in attendance at Tuesday's meeting, "We will only build with their approval."

Referring to the environmental concerns cited, Groberg said the turbines do not pollute streams or contribute to fog and haze.

He said the company will be helping with studies concerning wildlife populations in the areas where the wind farm is located, and said native seeds will be planted in the spots that have to be cleared for the turbines.

Regarding assertions that the development will hurt the tourism industry, Groberg shared a copy of the Tucker County Convention and Visitors Guide which features a picture of wind turbines on the front.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and there's no accounting for taste," Groberg reminded the crowd.

Tuckwiller said that in light of the concerns he has heard expressed by the citizenry, he recently made a trip to Knoxville, TN, to tour a 17-turbine wind farm.

"I must admit that there was no noise," he said, adding he saw deer, and squirrels and other types of wildlife in the area where the turbines were located.

"I don't think it's going to be as bad as we expect," he said of the proposed wind farm.

Tuckwiller noted energy demand is increasing and alternative sources, such as wind, are becoming more important. "I think Greenbrier County can be a player," he commented.

The commissioner also referred to the fact that MeadWestvaco owns the property in question, and said he does not believe the public should be able to tell a private landowner what it can and cannot do with its property.

"I appreciate your comments," he told the residents who gathered on Tuesday, but advised them the county commission does not have a role in this debate.

County Commission Hears Comments On Wind Farm