

Wind farm future foggy

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After the Grant County Council failed to pass amended changes to an economic development agreement with E.ON Climate and Renewables Wednesday, it's unclear whether wind turbines will come to western Grant County.

After listening to about 15 concerned citizens speak on their opposition of the Wildcat Wind Farm project, the council during its meeting decided to not approve the updated contract.

The original contract with E.ON was approved earlier this spring, but county commissioners had been in negotiations with the company for several months after hearing from concerned residents.

The amendments included setbacks of 1,200 feet away from non-participants' property and 1,500 feet away from the center of a household, whichever is the greatest distance. Grant County's wind ordinance permits construction of 480-foot wind turbines as close as 528 feet from roads and highways, property lines and residences

The wind farm had been expected to consist of 124 turbines in the area between Converse and Point Isabel, which would have encircled Swayzee.

However, because of the revised setbacks, the project would only consist of 60 towers in Grant County, meaning less money for E.ON, said Assistant Development Manager Denise Jensen.

For her protection, a sheriff's deputy escorted Jensen out of council chambers immediately following the meeting because of heated debates with audience members, so she wasn't available for comment.

If the agreement had been approved, construction would've started in December 2014 and finished in December 2015.

Officials were unsure what would happen now that the amended contract failed to pass.

County attorney Phil Stephenson said that if the agreement didn't pass the council, it would essentially stop the project because there wouldn't be a tax abatement for the company.

"If that's gone, the rest of the agreement is gone," he said.

Tom Hunt, attorney for E.ON, said after the meeting he didn't know what would happen, but he assumed the original agreement was still in force. He couldn't comment on whether the wind farm would still come, though.

"The company has to make a decision," he said.

Council President Jim McWhirt also said it was his understanding that the tax abatement wouldn't happen unless the contract passed Wednesday.

"Anything that would happen would not have the tax abatement in it," he said.

He said the county hasn't spent any money on the project, except for some legal fees and time spent discussing the issue.

"Where it goes from here, I really don't know at this point," he said.

McWhirt said he didn't know whether council members would look into the project more.

"At this point, we don't have a next step," he said.

He acknowledged that concessions were made in the agreement on behalf of the citizens, but he said it obviously wasn't enough because so many people spoke out against it. Nobody at the meeting spoke in favor of the project.

Hunt said the company conceded a lot in the amended agreement and gained nothing.

“I would argue that E.ON got less,” he said during the meeting, noting fewer towers and therefore less money to be made. “E.ON gave up quite a bit. They gained nothing by this.”

Concerns residents had included noise levels, especially for animals and children; the possible decrease of property values; shadow flickers; and difficulty selling a property with a turbine on it. Some members of the public were tearful as they talked about their opposition to the turbines.

Howard County resident Grace April said she would have to move if the project came to fruition because she has dairy cattle and a child with autism. She said 4,921 feet is the standard setback according to World Health Care Organization.

She urged officials to go back to the drawing board and do the project correctly.

“I think this could be a win/win situation if we just step back,” she said.

She brought with her a petition that she said contained names of more than 2,000 people who were against Wildcat Wind Farms.

Sixth-generation farmer David Morgan Jr. said he and his family haven’t leased their farm because they were concerned it would hurt their neighbors.

“A lot of people are struggling,” he said. “A lot of people have lost their jobs. If the turbines are erected, people are going to be stuck.”

There also was some confusion as to how many property owners had leasing agreements with E.ON. Jensen said there were 100 to 140, though the public claimed there were less than 40.

Council member Mike Conner originally made a motion to adopt the contract, and member Dan Brock seconded, but Brock withdrew after listening to public comment. He then made another motion to table the vote until February to give members more time to research the issue, but the motion died when nobody seconded it.

Council member Shane Middlesworth, who is a farmer, said he is in favor of wind energy but there are better places than on farmland.

“It’s near and dear to my heart because I’m a farmer,” he said.

Conner said he thought the project was a good idea because it was a small step toward being independent of foreign oil.

“We need to support new technology to get us to a point where we’re not as dependent for oil,” he said before the council voted. “I support wind energy, and if I vote not it’s because the public spoke.”

Brock said he received many conflicting reports, and it’s difficult to decipher what reports are factual.

In other business, the following transfers of appropriation were approved:

About \$26 from equipment to travel and conferences for Veterans Service Office.

About \$263 from travel and conference to retirement fund for the recorder’s office.

About \$1,000 from transcripts to miscellaneous appointments and about \$16 from transcripts to law books for Superior Court 1.

About \$477 from repair and maintenance to travel and conference for the prosecutor’s office.

\$500 from salaries to garage and motors; \$400 from charts and forms to garage and motors; \$4,500 from run reimbursement to equipment; and \$190 to pages for Grant County EMS.

About \$22,250 part-time/overtime fund to salary funds for Superior Court 2. Superior Court 2 received an additional appropriation of about \$2,076 from IV-D incentive fund to the salary fund.

About \$4,500 preventative maintenance to solidier burial; \$368 additional in the CEDIT fund to pay for dues for 2014 membership in the East Central Indiana Regional Planning District; and \$235,400 additional for employee retirement PERF from COIT fund for commissioners.

About \$3,800 from equipment to financial disaster recovery; \$400 from plat book equipment to plat book fund overtime/part-time; and \$100 from plat book retirement to plat book fund overtime/part-time for the auditor’s office.

Also at the meeting:

Karen Kellogg was reappointed to the Fairmount Public Library board for a four-year term beginning in January 2014.

Sierra Martin was reappointed to the Converse-Jackson Public Library for a four-year term.

David Huffman was reappointed to the Gas City Development Committee.

Also at the meeting, Commissioner Mike Burton said the county would be looking to fund two additional employees for the IT department. An official request would be made in January.