

Windmills a sound investment?



By **JASON COX | THE LEADER**

Two windmills can be seen from Lent Hill in Cohocton.

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Editor's note | This is the first part of a two-part look at developing concerns over wind farms in parts of Steuben County.

In early January, the blades in the 53-turbine First Wind project in the town of Cohocton began to spin. It was the first project in Steuben County to generate renewable energy and one of five under consideration in the county.

Within weeks, dozens of Cohocton residents went to the town board in neighboring Prattsburgh

to warn that the machines were proving to be noisy and harmful.

“Don’t let (the developers) buffalo you,” Cohocton resident Hal Graham told the Prattsburgh Town Board in late February. “You know, I wanted to do something for the environment. And now I can’t sleep at night.”

Graham initially supported wind farm development. [Presenter’s note: Graham is a leaseholder.]

Prattsburgh is the site of two wind farms planned by developers First Wind and EcoGen. Other projects have been proposed in the towns of Hartsville and Howard.

Since wind farms in Steuben County were first proposed in 2002, developers have admitted it’s hard to miss seeing the 400-foot-high turbines, but insisted they sound no louder than a refrigerator’s hum.

The projects have been promoted throughout the largely rural county as a quiet, inexpensive and environmentally-friendly way to provide renewable energy.

Environmental studies for Cohocton and Steuben County led to restrictions of the turbines’ sound to a maximum comfort level of 50 decibels. Setbacks were established to assure both noise and other potential dangers such as shadow flicker and flying debris were lessened.

Yet the promised “refrigerator hum” of the turbines was a falsity as residents began to compare the sound to the roar of a jet engine, according to Graham.

The Cohocton residents are among a growing number of people across the nation complaining the noise made by wind turbines is intrusive and disturbing. Medical professionals have compiled studies showing the noise can pose health hazards.

And the wind industry is beginning to take notice.

In Maine, where the state welcomed renewable energy, the Mars Hill project has been widely criticized for being noisy.

According to a March 26, 2008 report by the Daily News in Bangor, Maine, UPC Wind president and CEO Paul Gaynor said the company would do a better job in the future about letting local residents know what to expect from wind farms.

“I know there was an expectation (in Mars Hill) about what these were going to sound like,” Gaynor told the Daily News. “These are big structures and they do make sound.”

Shortly after Gaynor spoke to the Maine newspaper, the firm changed its name to First Wind. It was formerly known as Global Winds Harvest/UPC.

Local officials said they have relied on the best information available and worked to ensure the

...IV OF RESIDENTS.

Steuben County Industrial Development Agency Executive Director James Sherron said the agency has regulatory standards based on data from the state Department of Environmental Conservation and state Energy Research Development Agency.

The Steuben County IDA has established minimum distances that wind turbines can be to a residence, called a setback. There are also limits on decibel levels.

But Sherron said he has heard reports of 110 decibels in Cohocton -- twice the accepted limit -- and added any violations would go through a process of sound studies to decide the best way to solve the issue.

"We have a responsibility with the developers, they have to meet the criteria," Sherron said. "They could be asked to slow down the turbines, find alternatives. It could mean the unit would be removed."

Sherron said another factor in the noise may be the model of machine used in Cohocton.

While SCIDA initially reviewed 1.5 megawatt turbines, the five wind farm developers looking to do business in the county indicated they would be installing 2.3 megawatt turbines. The larger turbines were approved because SCIDA's consultants said there was no significant difference in their impact, Sherron said.

But all models under consideration are capable of exceeding 100 decibels at a maximum speed of 30 feet per second, according to a report to SCIDA by developer EverPower.

Typically, the blade rotation is reduced to lower speeds.

Yet some sound experts charge the current "acceptable" range of 45-50 decibels is excessive, and twice as loud as some background rural noise recorded at 20-25 decibels.

Acoustical engineer Richard James warned the noise is not only nerve-wracking, but poses health risks now being studied in the U.S. and in Europe, where wind farms have operated for nearly 20 years.

James likened the potential long-term effect of wind farms to the now-notorious region near Buffalo, where officials paved over the toxic waste which later poisoned residents. "This is like Love Canal," he said.