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Wind farm raises both concern and hope for Tioga

(Editor's note: In the conclusion of a two-part report on a proposed wind farm north of Tioga, supporters of the project explain how they plan to meet concerns raised by opponents.)

By Kevin Killough

Construction on the Lindahl Wind Project isn't expected to begin until June 2016, but representatives from Tradewind Energy, the company building the wind farm, are in Tioga this month talking to the public about how the project will impact Tioga and the surrounding region.

Unlike most wind energy projects, the Lindahl Wind Project was initiated by approximately 20 landowners north of Tioga, who organized to produce a lease, which they then sold to Tradewind.

The 14-year-old renewable energy company from Kansas has developed six wind farms and one solar plant that together produce about 1 gigawatt of power.

"Our experience is the Midwest wind belt," said Brice Barton, senior project developer for Tradewind.

The Lindahl Wind Project is the company's first in North Dakota, and it will be the first wind farm in the far northwest corner of the state.

Depending on the size of the turbines, approximately 75 of them will be spread out over about 28 square miles north of Tioga. The nature of the design and the location of existing infrastructure will make placement of the towers uneven, but on average there will be about 2 to 3 towers per square mile.

At full capacity the farm will produce about 150 megawatts of power, depending on the strength of the wind at any given time.

Since the wind doesn't blow all the time, wind energy can only supplement base load power supplies, which provide constant and reliable energy.

"We sell our resource as an intermittent resource," Barton said.

Concerns

The encroachment of industry following the oil boom has left people in the area much more cautious when new projects come around, and residents have been voicing concerns about possible impacts.

The Williams County Planning and Zoning Commission tabled the company's request for a conditional use permit for some testing towers after several landowners expressed concerns. The commission asked for input from the City of Tioga before making a recommendation to the county commission for approval of the permit.

They asked the company to do more community outreach.

Tradewind was under contractual obligations not to discuss the wind farm while negotiations were underway with Basin Electric to purchase the power from the project. The agreement is pivotal to the success of wind farm developments, organizers said.

With that agreement now finalized, the company is scrambling to meet with public officials and hold public presentations to address any concerns.

Barton grew up on a farm and said many of the principle people at Tradewind have a rural background. Their projects are developed away from population centers, and they are experienced in working with rural communities.

"We understand the challenges that farmers and ranchers face," Barton said.

The computer-generated graphic above, provided by the developer, shows the possible spacing of wind turbines in Lindahl Township. In press releases, the project has been quoted as being capable of powering 50,000 homes, a figure that requires some qualification. This doesn't mean 50,000 households can satisfy their power needs, but as a rule of thumb in describing 150 megawatts of power -- the proposed capacity of the Lindahl Wind Project.

EXHIBIT 44

Opposition group organizing to protest proposed wind farm

By Kevin Killough

Preserving The Prairie is an organization of more than 20 landowners in around Lindahl Township who have emerged to fight the Lindahl Wind Project.

They have a range of concerns, including how the turbines will be reclaimed, degradation of the natural landscape, cost of subsidies, effects of noise and lights, and impacts on the health of livestock, hunting, wildlife, and aviation.

Jason Hove, who was born and raised on a family farm in the area where the wind farm is planned, said he's concerned the companies are not legally required to hold bonds, which may stick taxpayers or landowners with reclamation costs.

"My biggest concern is future generations are going to have to deal with it, because it's something that's permanent," Hove said. "Future generations are going to have to clean up enough mess the way it is. Why give them more to clean up and worry about?"

Brice Barton, senior development manager, with Tradewind energy -- the company developing the project -- said state statute does require bonding, and the leases signed with the landowners also require bonds for reclamation.

Jody Weflen, who is planning to move onto property in the area her family owns, said Tradewind has not been very communicative about the project with landowners in the area who are not directly involved.

"It's been very discreet," she said.

Barton said in the process of negotiating power purchase agreements, it's standard procedure not to make a lot of formal announcements. And without such agreements, wind projects can't move forward, making any prior announcements premature.

The company is now in the process of talking to the community, including holding two public informational meetings on the project this week, and they will be doing a presentation at the Tioga city commission meeting on Thursday.

Trust issues

Hove and Weflen also raise concerns about how the turbines will impact the natural scenery of the area. From the top of the blade, they can reach as much as 400 feet, and they are required to have flashing lights on top of them.

"I do treasure my North Dakota scenery," said Weflen.

"This is going to affect a lot more people than just the landowners . . . these things can be seen for miles away," Hove said.

The group is also concerned about noise. The company has said the noise impact is minimal, but some landowners are wondering how much they can trust these claims.

"So do we just sit back and wait until they're up? And if we do have noise issues, are they going to correct them?" Weflen asked.

The effect on hunting and aerial spraying is also a concern.

Benefits?

Hove said his family was approached with the leases and after researching the impacts of the turbines and talking to people who live around them, they decided such a project would not be a good use of their land.

"They found there's more negatives than positives," Hove said.

The group of landowners who coordinated their leases have claimed they are all-inclusive, even if landowners do not have turbines on their land, and the company is touting many benefits of the project to the community.

Weflen doesn't believe this project will carry any benefits to her.

"I'd like to know how I'm going to benefit from this. Technically, I'm only going to have an eyesore and a hazard," she said.

Development Consultant for Tradewind Todd Wilen came to the January meeting of the Economic Development Corporation to discuss the project.

Wilen has decades of experience in energy, a career in engineering that began in the 1980s working on nuclear missiles. After the de-escalation of the arms race, Wilen turned his skills towards the energy industry. Since then, he's worked in gas turbine generation, hydroelectric, and wind.

The Tioga Airport Board has voted against the project, according to President Chris Norgaard, due to concerns the project may affect future airport approach routes used by pilots.

When Norgaard, who is also president of the EDC, talked

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WIND: Company is reaching out to educate the community

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about the Airport Board's concerns, Wilen assured the group the company can find a way to accommodate the airport's needs before proceeding with construction. Tradewind has two aviation consultants working on the project.

"We are not building this to block Tioga Airport," Wilen said.

After cursory discussions at city commission meetings, Tioga commissioners expressed concern on how the wind farm might prevent future development.

With the Tioga gas plant and Hess train yard blocking development to the east and west, city officials fear land for future growth, to the north, could also be blocked.

Last week, representatives of the company met with Tioga Commissioners Heather Wefien and John Grubb, and the city building inspector. They plan to do further presentations at a commission meeting in the near future.

There's a four mile space between current city limits and where the closest turbines could be located, partly due to FAA restrictions on turbines inside airport approach patterns. Grubb said the space is enough to accommodate growth well into the future of Tioga.

"They went over it real thoroughly," Grubb said of the two-and-a-half hour meeting. "A lot of our concerns were addressed, as far as how close to town it is."

The issue of noise and safety is also on many people's minds, and the issue was raised at both the EDC meeting and the meeting with Wefien and Grubb.

According to Barton, a turbine is about as loud as a lawnmower when it's running at full speed. This would be the sound level if you were standing on top of the 200-foot towers.

"You get 300 feet away from it, it makes less noise than a microwave. At 1,000 feet it makes

running," Barton said.

The setback for the turbines from a residence is 1,600 feet. The state requires the towers be placed 1.1 times the height of the tip of the turbine blade away from roads. Sizes vary, but some can be as high as 400 feet, meaning such towers would be 440 feet from the roads.

"It's responsible siting," Barton said.

The company is continuing to address concerns. Public information meetings yesterday and today, Jan. 20 and 21, are aimed at answering questions of anyone in the area who would like to know more about the project. The meetings are at the Neset Consulting Building from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Benefits

Some people believe the project is worth community support and believe the company is readily addressing any concerns they have.

Grubb said the project could diversify the local economy.

"Oil is our mainstay, but anything else coming into the economy is good," Grubb said. "It's a little more boom to the economy."

Following his meeting with company representatives, Grubb said he is comfortable recommending approval of the county's conditional use permit.

"I would say it would be fine. I don't see any negative impacts to the city," Grubb said.

Dallas Lalim, who is one of the landowners who initiated the project, has been involved in every aspect of the project planning since the company first came to Tioga.

"I think it's a positive for the community," Lalim said.

Barton said the project will create temporary jobs during construction and about 10 to 12 long-term technician jobs

Wilen said the project generate about $700,000 in revenue to Williams Cou and about $1 million to million to the leasing landc ers.

"This project has const able economic impacts for area," Wilen told the EDC m bers. "There's consider monies coming into the c munity."

Permitting

The project will require n than just the county's appro After the conditional use mit, the North Dakota Pu Service Commission requ a certificate of site compat ity. A variety of conditions need to be met, including input of non-interested l owners.

Then there are a variet federal permits that must obtained. The feds requir chaeological and wetland s lies. The US Fish and Wil and Federal Aviation Ad istration have a complic regulatory environment company must navigate to approval.

"We take into account lands, other easements, munications – you name Barton said.

If all goes according plan, the company hope be online by Dec. 2016. B ground breaks on the first er, the company has a strin hurdles to overcome.

Once operational, the p would be utilized in the re al grid, potentially flowin Tioga and Ray homes.

"There has to be a good eration mix," Barton said. the wind resources in N Dakota are some of the be the wind belt."

Lalim said with growth jections showing a ra expanding population for next several years, every the Bakken can do to driv and expand its power sup going to prevent potential er shortages down the roa

"It's a way to keep the l on for everybody," he said