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Changing the landscape

Having cheaper alternative energy source often means ruining the landscape, and elected officials have to decide what constituents want more

By KATE DAY SAGER



EAGLE - Municipal officials riding a tour bus this week along Route 39 toward the town of Eagle first spotted several 300-foot-high wind turbines at a distance of about two miles.

A tour of the Bliss wind turbine park, sponsored by the Southern Tier West Regional Planning and Development Board, was set up to provide town officials in Cattaraugus County and Potter County with information on various aspects of wind turbines. Proposals for wind turbine farms have been reviewed locally in communities that include the towns of Allegany and Carrollton as well as across the county.

Daniel Reynolds, regional environmental analyst with Southern Tier West, said the purpose of the day-long conference and tour was to provide information for municipal officials on the wind energy bill. The bill, signed in 2004 by Gov. George Pataki, requires the state to receive 25 percent of its electricity from renewable energy sources such as wind power. Tax incentives for wind energy companies have provided additional motivation for the development of wind turbine farms.

Experts in the areas of agriculture, avian ecology and energy development were some of those who spoke at the conference.

"We usually try to stay as middle of the road as we possible can," Mr. Reynolds said of the conference. "We do not try to steer them (municipal leaders) to make a decision any it's completely their own choice."

Lewis County attorney Richard Graham spoke at the conference and said his community, the town of Watson, has 195 wind turbines that span a 22-mile area. He said the community land owners have received more than a \$1 million a year for the past several years from the project. In addition, the community benefited from an additional \$1 million in sales tax revenue a year that were generated from the project. Mr. Graham did caution the town leaders on some aspects of the projects.

"One of the things you have to look forward to with these, is you have to plan for change," Mr. Graham said. He said communities that don't specifically identify what the development build may find themselves with bigger wind towers and more than were expected. He said the larger the towers and blades, the more megawatts produced.

In addition, he said communities need to firmly establish how and where access roads will be built to construct the turbines, and what reclamation plans will be in place to restore the land. Plans also need to specify who will be responsible for removing the huge turbines when they've outlived their usefulness.

Also on hand was Sherry Grugel, outreach associate with Noble Environmental Power, which is developing the wind turbine parks in Bliss, a hamlet in the town of Eagle. The company plans to develop wind turbine parks in nearby Centerville and Perry.

Ms. Grugel said her company started in late April building the turbines in Bliss and the towers all should be in place by November. She said the company currently has 55 turbines in place and will put in 12 more.

"I think the biggest comment we've had is the traffic" with people and tours driving by to see the wind turbines, Ms. Grugel said. She also noted that she hasn't heard from many people who have been against the development.

A TOWN OF EAGLE resident in favor of the project is Tom Dutton, who grew up on a farm across the road from his current residence along Route 39.

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Mr. Dutton said the presence of the large turbines, visible from his yard and from most residences in the community, doesn't bother him.

"Just look down the road at these telephone poles and electric poles," he said. Mr. Dutton admitted that he didn't think the wind turbines would be quite as large as they are.

"If you can save natural gas and polluting the air with coal" it's good, he added. He noted that he believed the majority of residents were in favor of the project, especially those who are receiving lease payments for the towers on their land which can be between \$6,000 and \$10,000 a year.

One local land owner who has spoken out against the large wind turbines is Dave Bassett. Mr. Bassett is retired from the U.S. Department of Energy and has property in Wyoming. He said his main issue with the new towers is their size. He also noted that he has been a strong supporter of wind energy since the 1970s.

"The big question with big solar or big wind is the scale issue," Mr. Bassett said. "If they (developers) would just back off on the size of the towers, it would be a much easier sell."

He said he believes the wind companies use a "bait and switch" tactic when they bring in giant turbines to populated areas. He noted the 125-foot wind turbine towers that have been built in the Wethersfield area are "noticeable but not as obnoxious" as the larger towers.

Mr. Bassett said there are a number of other issues, such as equitable cash flow to the community, as each wind turbine can generate \$350,000 to \$500,000 in electricity each year. Other issues that should be reviewed are interruptions of bird migration routes over the western part of the state as well as the construction of underground export corridors to transport electricity to larger grids.

A resident of the town of Eagle, Ed Strusa, was more basic in his objections to the turbines. A native of Buffalo, Mr. Strusa and his wife, Beverly, moved to the rural community 15 years ago to build a log cabin home with forest and farm country as their back yard.

"This is my view now," he said pointing to the large wind turbines looming high above the tree lines. "This looks like the 'War of the Worlds' out here, I mean I previously had a beautiful, gorgeous view.

"I can see 13 of these (wind towers) out here, and they say 'your property value is going to increase' but do you think that's going to increase my property value," he asked.

In addition, he said the towers will have blinking lights on them at night to keep aircraft away making the area look like an industrial park.

"I think people were shocked when they saw what they (wind towers) looked like," he said.