

LOCAL NEWS

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Governor urges Tyrone to approve wind farm

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TYRONE - A new voice has entered Tyrone Borough's long debate over a proposed wind farm.

Gov. Ed Rendell called Mayor Jim Kilmartin in early February to urge borough officials to approve a lease agreement with Sandy Ridge Wind Farm developer Gamesa.

The wind farm project calls for leasing space in the borough's watershed area of Ice Mountain to build 12 to 15 wind turbines, generating at least \$91,000 a year for the borough. The 30-year lease could mean between \$3 million and \$5 million over the life of the lease.

Kilmartin said Rendell pointed out that it "is a significant project for Gamesa." As the mayor understood it, he said Rendell made it clear that Tyrone's lack of participation would counteract the state's multimillion dollar efforts that brought the Spain-based wind developer to Pennsylvania.

The Department of Community and Economic Development put together a \$5.31 million incentive package in 2005 to help Gamesa open its turbine manufacturing facility in Cambria County, and a total of \$15 million has been provided to Gamesa by the state for wind energy development.

Kilmartin wouldn't go into detail but said the governor offered his help in bringing the wind farm deal to fruition, indicating there could be special consideration for the borough on a future issue that could use a boost from Harrisburg.

One thing the mayor is interested in is the possibility that Tyrone's soon-to-be decommissioned National Guard Armory becomes a community center.

"The governor has a say in those things," Kilmartin said, noting that was just one consideration, and the council would have to discuss other areas where the governor could possibly assist.

A call to Rendell's office to confirm the conversation was not returned.

Meanwhile, those opposed to the deal said they would keep fighting the planned wind farm despite knowing the council will likely approve it in the coming months.

"It's just a temporary reprieve," said Tyrone resident Skip Chamberlain, who likened building wind turbines to produce electricity to "building a bridge out of gold or silver."

Not only aren't wind turbines good for Ice Mountain, Chamberlain claimed, but they also aren't very good at making electricity once subsidies and other incentives are taken out of the picture.

Jeff Morrissey, a resident of Snyder Township who has actively worked against the wind farm, said Thursday the next step is fighting the development's approval in Snyder Township, where the borough's watershed is situated and much of the project is planned.

"We're going to fight to the end," Morrissey said. "We're not going to give up."

Because Ice Mountain is recognized as an Important Bird Area by the state and federal government, Gamesa will need a waiver from Snyder Township officials to build the wind farm. Morrissey said he already had reservations about some parts of the township's wind farm ordinance, but the provision excluding building within an IBA was something he wholeheartedly supported.

"I will be extremely upset if Snyder Township gives a waiver or changes the ordinance," Morrissey said.

Councilwoman Pat Stoner, who is still recuperating from heart surgery, missed the vote in January. She said this week that although she has personal misgivings about turbines on Ice Mountain at the headwaters of the borough's watershed, she'll vote for the plans when they come before the council again.

"I made a commitment to the voters when we did the survey that I would respect their wishes," Stoner said, referring to an informal survey of nearly 1,100 voters during last year's primary election. In that survey, 55 percent said they favored leasing portions of the borough's 3,800-acre watershed to Gamesa.

Article Photos

(Mirror photo by Gary M. Baranec)
A man walks on Ice Mountain, outside Tyrone, near the proposed Sandy Ridge Wind Farm site. The project calls for leasing space in the borough's watershed area of Ice Mountain to build 12 to 15 wind turbines.

Councilman Jim Grazier, along with Jen Bryan and Virgie Werner, voted in favor of the proposal. Grazier said although it is a "tough decision," he wants to move forward after two-and-a-half years of debate.

Grazier said the millions in revenue over the 30-year term of the lease will help the borough keep taxes in check.

"It's extra revenue, so you don't have to put it all on the taxpayers' shoulders," he said.

Following advice from the borough's forester and results of a watershed study completed last fall, Grazier said the benefits outweigh risks associated with developing the watershed.

He said the additional revenue from the lease should go to decrease the cost of government.

"This new revenue in no way can be used as a rubber stamp for new spending," Grazier said.

Bryan said the watershed study confirmed her belief that the development could take place safely on the watershed.

"I know it's not going to resolve all of our energy issues, but it's a start," she said of wind power.

Bryan noted every council member has researched the issue diligently. She's hopeful that if Gamesa does build its turbines on the watershed, the money can go toward conservation efforts within the borough, such as the \$150,000 Tyrone Borough plans to spend this year on gypsy moth and hemlock woolly adelgid pest control.

Werner said she voted for the project because she sees electric power as important for growth and because she has heard from more people for the wind farm than against it.

"I got angry calls after the meeting from people saying we didn't follow the will of the voters from last year's poll," she said.

Werner said she's tried to listen to both sides and pointed out Ice Mountain is far from the pristine wilderness that the project's opponents claim.

Even Kilmartin, who voted against the proposed lease, said he's not opposed to the wind farm. He just thinks if Tyrone's participation is so crucial to Gamesa, then perhaps the borough can get a better deal.

Frank Maisano, a spokesman for a coalition of wind industry companies including Gamesa, said the borough isn't likely to benefit from waiting. Given the time frame for getting a project like the Sandy Ridge Wind Farm up and running, delaying another two years will mean lost revenues and not more companies clamoring to bid, he said.

"They're going to have to start from scratch," said Maisano, who noted wind and environmental studies will have to be done. There's also the fact that Tyrone officials have repeatedly promised to make a decision on the issue only to say they need more time.

Josh Framel, Gamesa's project manager for the Sandy Ridge Wind Farm, said that even if a decision were made to go ahead with the project, it would be at least a year before construction and a year-and-a-half until the farm was operational.

Framel didn't close the door to going ahead with the project without the borough's involvement but said "we want to definitely get a decision out of them before we consider a 12- to 15-wind turbine project."

While Gamesa met with Tyrone officials this week, the proposed deal hasn't changed, Framel noted, and the borough is still exploring an additional community project the company could undertake with the borough. Kilmartin said a subcommittee was being formed to look at the latest deal sweetener but declined to offer examples of what it might entail.

"We're just looking to get some sort of conclusion to this," Framel said.

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