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Setbacks around every turbine: Reworking wind farm siting rules still ongoing

Saturday, May 14, 2011, SAMANTHA TIPLER, East Oregonian | eastoregonian.com

When it comes to setbacks for wind turbines, Umatilla County commissioners have plenty of choices.

Setbacks, the distances between a wind turbine and a city, house or road, have been a key topic as the county reworks its wind power siting guidelines.

The board of commissioners spent more than seven hours Thursday in a continuation of a hearing that began March 17. In between, on May 3, they held a work session.

Commissioners were looking at least three different drafts of the rules Thursday: The draft the Umatilla County Planning Commission took more than a year to craft and handed over to commissioners in February; the draft commissioners discussed during their work session last week; and a draft submitted by a united front of wind company representatives on Thursday.

Commissioners have not decided on any single draft, and they may yet still draft another that combines all three, along with comments from the public.

On most of the setbacks, the wind power companies by and large agreed with the board of commissioners' work session draft. Here is a brief summary:

- **Cities:** Both the planning commission's draft and the wind power companies' draft recommend two miles or 20 times the tower height (measured from the base to the tip of the blade). The commissioners' work session draft suggested having no setback unless a city requests one.
- **Unincorporated communities:** The wind power companies' draft and the commissioners' work session draft agreed, suggesting one mile. The planning commission suggested ten times the turbine height.
- **House:** Again, the commissioners' work session draft and the wind power companies' draft agreed. They suggested a one-half mile setback for a home involved with the wind project, and a full mile for any home not involved. The planning commission wanted two miles or 20 times the tower height, the same as the requirement for cities.
- **Roads:** The two drafts agreed again, this time suggesting 110 percent of the turbine height. The planning commission draft disagreed, suggesting twice the turbine height.

As an add-on to all these suggestions, Elaine Albrich, attorney with Stoel Rives, said the wind power companies would also like to include an option for waivers.

“It allows the developer to know what the county expects for a setback although it gives the discretion — to whatever involvement, whether a city or a landowner — to waive that setback and have turbines closer to their property if they reach some kind of an agreement,” Albrich said.

Thursday’s meeting was not the end of the rulemaking process.

Though the commissioners closed oral testimony at the end of the long meeting, they will still accept written testimony until the close of the business day on Friday, May 20.

Then on June 14 the hearing will continue at 9 a.m. At that meeting, commissioners plan to have one semifinal draft for review. They will have a final, decision-making meeting on June 28.

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