



Beauty of the Blues is worth more than some give it credit

Sunday, August 23, 2009

The final of three meetings on the highly-controversial issue of wind turbines in the foothills of the Blue Mountains takes place Thursday before the Umatilla County Planning Commission.

We've said it before and we'll say it again: The commission should recognize there is a "significant resource" in our Blue Mountains and its foothills. Frankly, we don't see how the commission members could decide otherwise.

At the heart of the issue is an amendment of the county's comprehensive plan, known as Goal 5. This Goal 5 amendment is a citizen-driven request to protect the rolling foothills of farming, grazing and forested lands in the Blue Mountains between Pendleton and Walla Walla.

We believe it deserves to remain unobstructed from the giant turbines, collector lines, substations, roads and other supporting facilities necessary for the industrial project proposed by Gaelectric Northwest. At the very least, it deserves a slow and thoughtful process for the placement of wind turbines in our region.

Gaelectric Northwest, which has offices in Clarkston, Wash., argues its proposed project will bring money and jobs to Umatilla County. Van Jamison, vice president of strategic operations for the company, estimates the construction of the Lincton Mountain project will cost roughly \$400 million. In his letter to commission members, he admitted that wind towers will "change the nature of the landscape." He goes on to say he likes the turbines because it indicates the area is committed to building a sound economic future and "not preserving a degenerating status quo."

We can buy his economic argument even if it's not relevant to the issue at hand, but we're certainly not ready to brand the beauty of the Blues as a "degenerating status quo." That obviously comes from someone who doesn't live here. That an Irish-based company, which has no current wind projects operating in the U.S., wants to forever change our natural landscape doesn't move us to suddenly jump up and support its money-making venture.

Curiously, in the previous two meetings, several commission members seem confused about their role. Comments from at least two of them indicated their concern was for private property rights. While individual rights is an important issue, that's not a determining factor in this decision. The primary role is planning for Umatilla County - its 70,000 citizens.

Commission members who focused on a "unique" resource were on target, even if they indicated they needed to be persuaded of the beauty and significance of the foothills of the Blue Mountains. "I want to be convinced we ... have this unique resource here to protect," said commission member Don Wysocki. Another commission member, Frank Kaminski, said he wanted to know how the viewshed of the Blues was unique.

We would encourage those members to drive north on Highway 11 between Pendleton and Walla Walla, especially at dawn or at sunset. Stop at Adams. Stop at Athena. Especially stop on the hill before descending into Milton-Freewater. Drive Cottonwood, Powerline, Foster, Hood or countless other roads in northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington. You'll be awed by the beauty of the Blues.

There are also unanswered questions about the potential impact on salmon in the Walla Walla River and the elk herds in the Blues. The result of recognition of the significance of the viewshed of the Blues by the commission will trigger a study on the economic, social, environmental and energy impacts. In fact, it could still result in the siting of wind turbines. It would rightfully show the way to a balanced and thoughtful approach that will serve our county for the present and future generations. In closing, we repeat some of the words of our previous editorial on this issue.

Eastern Oregon is a resource-based economy. Our land, our timber and our water have long contributed to our well-being. Our county's leaders must attempt to carefully use what we have to sustain our economy. It's a delicate balance between the present economy and choices that could spoil the landscape and its resources forever. Citizens must demand a slow and thoughtful process for the placement of wind turbines in our region.

To achieve that, the county - as well as the state - should not approve random sitings without a master plan.

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