

Umatilla County to review another draft of wind rules

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On Tuesday, the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners will hold another meeting analyzing possible changes to the rules allowing wind farms in the county.

The board has spent three previous meetings pouring over the changes proposed by the planning commission.

“I really thing we’ve come a long way,” said Tamra Mabbott, county planning director.

At this point the discussion isn’t whether wind turbines will continue to be in Umatilla County, she said.

“Clearly Umatilla County is open for business,” she said. “It’s a matter of how the county will review and issue permits in a balanced way.”

Things seem to be falling in line as the commissioners plan to review a draft of the laws that is almost finished. Only four issues still need to be settled, Mabbott said. Those are: the setbacks between rural homes and wind turbines, the big issue of the Walla Walla watershed, the need for a socioeconomic study and how the wind companies ensure payback after a wind farm stops operation.

Rural home setbacks:

Setbacks have always been a hot topic when it comes to wind turbines. So far, the parties making the rules seem to agree on the setbacks from a city (two miles from an urban growth boundary unless a city authorizes a lesser distance) and from roads (110 percent of the tower to blade height).

But the distance between a tower and rural home is still up for debate.

The planning commission suggested two miles or 20 times the tower height. The board of commissioners was considering a half-mile inside the project boundary, one mile outside the boundary. Wind companies (which submitted a draft of suggestions on May 3) suggested the same, but called residents a “participating land owner” or “non-participating land owner.”

At the meeting Tuesday, people will be allowed to comment. In its documents, the planning commission asks for comments on this issue. It wrote:

“The board has received copious comment on what setbacks should be required. At the June 14th hearing the board is inviting testimony on the following question: if a two-mile setback from homes was established, should waivers be authorized, allowing wind towers to be sited closer? And, if so, what methodology or standards should be established for such waivers?”

Walla Walla watershed:

The Walla Walla watershed is a place and issue that has come up at almost every meeting Umatilla County has held regarding wind power development.

Objections have run from Richard Jolly and the Blue Mountain Alliance asking to designate the land east of Highway 11 as a special resource, to Milton-Freewater Orchardist Ron Brown explaining the extensive work he and other irrigators have done to restore the river and keep their water rights, to wildlife experts talking about elk wintering range and threatened and endangered species in the area.

“The board has heard a lot about the sensitive nature of the Blue Mountain foothills and the Walla Walla watershed,” Mabbott said. “What the board heard is a there is a sense of urgency.”

She said the board may consider having special siting standards for the watershed. Those could include not allowing construction on highly erodible soils, setbacks of two miles from streams with endangers species and keeping wind turbines out of sensitive habitats.

Socioeconomic study:

The planning commission and the board of commissioners both would like to require a socioeconomic impact study from wind power companies that addresses “social, economic, public service, cultural, visual and recreational aspects” that could be affected in communities near the turbines.

The wind companies ‘comments ask for the requirement to be removed. There also have been requests for a standard by which this study could be measured.

Mabbott said a socioeconomic study can be different depending on the wind project.

“It can be a page or pages and pages,” she said. “It is a more subjective document than what otherwise might be evaluated in the land use application, so there’s pros and cons with that as well.”

Payback:

Another part of the proposed laws requires wind power companies prove they can pay if a wind farm stops production and has to be torn down.

There are two ways a company can prove it has the funds: a surety bond and a letter of credit.

In the proposed laws, the county wants to only accept a surety bond. The wind companies would like the letter of credit to remain an option.

The Energy Facility Siting Council, the state entity that decides on larger wind farms, allows for both.