

Commissioners OK setback — for now

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By SAMANTHA TIPLER | Posted: Wednesday, June 15, 2011 12:10 pm

Cindy Severe sat in front of the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners and held up a thick stack of papers.

She and other residents had taken to the streets and gathered signatures, asking people to sign off on a two-mile setback between wind turbines and rural homes.

“We tried to get an overall feel of what the populace was saying,” Severe said. “And it was an eye-opener. It was an eye-opener.”

Personally, Severe saw 406 people.

Of those, she said only 19 refused to sign the petition. A few of them didn't mind turbines, but others worked in the wind industry or had family who worked in the wind industry.

Of those who signed, she said she saw a wide variety of responses, from people who didn't want them near their homes to those who didn't want any in the county at all.

Severe submitted that stack of signatures gathered by herself and others into the commissioners' pot of about 130 exhibits.

“I submit to you, commissioners — not just me sitting up here asking for a two-mile setback — 1,394 Umatilla County residents asked you, please give them a two-mile setback,” Severe said.

The commissioners listened to Severe's request and the majority of other people who spoke during the nearly three hours of testimony on the setback issue.

They went over that issue and three others during a seven-hour hearing Tuesday. All that work is going toward the commissioners' final decision on changes to rules that determine where wind turbines can be installed in the county.

Commissioners have already come to a consensus on other setbacks: two miles from a city's urban growth boundary, one mile from an unincorporated community, 110 percent of the tower-to-blade-tip height from roads.

In all cases, wind companies can negotiate lesser setbacks by paying waivers to landowners or negotiating them with cities.

At the end of the long day, the commissioners agreed to the two-mile setback from rural homes — for now.

Commissioner Dennis Doherty was the most in favor of the setback. He countered claims by wind companies that the two-mile exclusion would put them out of business.

“For all the good things that wind power does, it still seems to me that it can survive and it can find a place in Umatilla County with a two-mile setback,” Doherty said. “And if we can work out a way to provide some flexibility to that so that it can go closer to rural homes, that’s fine.”

Commissioner Bill Hansell was in favor of a one-mile setback, but he was willing to go along with an alternative Commissioner Larry Givens proposed.

Givens suggested approving the two-mile setback for now, but asking the Oregon Solutions program to look into the issue.

Oregon Solutions is a process headed by the governor’s office that brings many people to the table to solve a problem. It helped last year to get the levee work started in Milton-Freewater, and helped motivate people to pass a bond to fund that work.

Umatilla County Planning Director Tamra Mabbott said if the commissioners approved the two-mile setback now, it would have to go through another rule-making process again to change it.

Commissioners seemed fine with that.

The commissioners have been working on these rule changes since March. The planning commission worked on its rule change proposal for a year before that, and has been talking about it since 2008.

Givens suggested the Oregon Solutions effort go on for six months before the commissioners addressed it again.

Even though the commissioners came to a consensus, they did not make a decision on the rules yet. There is at least one more meeting on June 28. Commissioners will keep taking public comment until then.

The work is not over for citizens either. Just as Severe was submitting her 1,394 signatures at the hearing, three more people from the audience of about 70 chimed in wanting to sign.

“Thank you,” Severe said, and announced the new number, “1,397.”