

By EDWIN McCOY
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The Botetourt Planning Commission was unanimous in recommending that the Board of Supervisors approve a special exceptions permit (SEP) for the proposed Rocky Forge Wind Project on North Mountain.

The planners lauded the efforts by the planning and zoning staff and Apex Clean Energy for their detail and diligence in preparing the zoning ordinance amendments that set the stage for the SEP application, the application and the review that followed.

After a two-hour public hearing in Central Academy Middle School's Forum in Fincastle, the planners first voted 5-0 that the project, which could put as many as 25 utility-scale turbines on the south end of North Mountain, is compatible with the county's Comprehensive Plan, then voted 5-0 to recommend that the supervisors grant the SEP with 17 conditions.

About 50 persons attended the public hearing and 14 spoke following an hour-long presentation about the project by Zoning Administrator Nicole Pendleton and representatives from Apex Clean Energy. Ten outright favored the project, two opposed it and two had concerns they hoped were mitigated going forward.

Several who favored the project came from Rockbridge County, Craig County, Franklin County, Crozet, Roanoke and Illinois. Two of them are opposed to the Mountain Valley Pipeline that is proposed to carry natural gas in a new pipeline through parts of Southwest Virginia.

They said the Apex wind project will have much less impact than the pipeline, and is a "positive" course for renewable energy.

"I wish Mountain Valley Pipeline would be as agreeable as Apex," Dawn McDowell of New Castle said while praising the county for having the opportunity to produce local energy.

Being able to produce renewable energy was echoed several times by other speakers.

Matt Cooper, who lives on Timber Ridge Road, Buchanan, said his property would be affected by the wind turbines, but they will bring "much needed revenue to the county, and added, "Renewable energy is the future. I support moving this to the next level."

Harry Gum, who lives on Dagger Springs Road and is one of the closest residents to the proposed wind energy project, told the planners he doesn't mind looking at the wind turbines that will be as tall as 549 feet. "We've got to get away from fossil fuel and use clean energy," he told the planners.

A neighbor on Dagger Springs Road, Jason Fender, said he supported the wind project, but asked the planners to require Apex to do something during construction about the dust on the gravel portion of the road where he lives. He asked that Apex be mandated to extend the blacktop past his home. It ends near his home.

Apex Project Manager Charlie Johnson told the planners the company usually uses water or water and a chemical to control dust during construction. He also said the company imposes a speed limit on workers.

Robert Hundley gave the planners a brochure about the North Mountain Wildlife Corridor that he said was established in 2013 to acknowledge the importance of wildlife being able to move between the Allegheny Mountains and Blue Ridge Mountains,

including from the southern end of North Mountain to Purgatory Mountain at Buchanan where the two mountain ranges are closest together.

“What Apex will do is make a farce of this wildlife corridor,” Hundley told the planners. Sherry Crumley of Buchanan, who described herself as a conservationist and wildlife enthusiast, told the planners wind energy is endorsed by a number of conservation and wildlife organizations, including the National Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation. She said global warming is the greatest threat to wildlife and asked the planners to endorse the wind project.

Bill VanVelzer of Troutville opposed the project. He said noise requirements and setbacks are not sufficient. “We’re talking about 25 546-foot-tall wind turbines that represent forever the industrialization of North Mountain,” he said.

He then quoted historian Stephen Ambrose: “You’re going to deem this area a public sacrifice zone,” he told the planners.

Lynn Dluzniewski had concerns about the FFA-required lights on the turbines. She said they will be more visible than the turbines and wondered if they’d be a distraction. She also asked if the contractor will be from Virginia, about the turbine tower color and the manufacturer.

Johnson said the FAA will set the requirements for lighting.

Rockbridge County resident Eli Fishpaw asked the planners to recommend approval of the SEP. “We have to build an economy that’s net carbon neutral,” he told the planners. “You can become a role model for my county.”

Rockbridge County officials did send a letter to the planners asking them to delay a decision on the Apex application, Pendleton told the planners. She said the letter referenced the volume of material to go through and the time they had to do it as the reason for the delay.

One of the planners asked if the turbines would be visible from Rockbridge and Johnson said he couldn’t say.

The Board of Supervisors will hold a public hearing on the Apex request Tuesday, Jan. 26 at 6 p.m. at Greenfield Education and Training Center.

Apex officials said there are still state and federal permits to be completed before the project can start. They include Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, U.S. Fish and Wildlife and FAA permits.

Johnson said they hope that process is finished by the third quarter of this year. If the supervisors approve the SEP and the other permits are in hand by the third quarter, he said preconstruction work will begin. The company hopes the turbines are in operation by the fourth quarter of 2017 if all permits are approved.