

# State enters debate over wind energy

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Wind turbines just off U.S. 30 in Van Wert County, Ohio, can be seen for miles.

The flat farmlands of northeast Indiana aren't as vast as the sweeping plains of Texas, the state that leads the nation in wind power.

Developers say there's plenty of energy to be harnessed in the region's wind, but how – and if – that happens depends not only on government incentives to big wind developers but home rule in the region's rural counties.

David Sewell, Whitley County's executive director of planning and building, describes himself as an "eternal optimist." He's been a public planner for 35 years, nearly half that time in Whitley County, and he's seen his share of land-use battles – landfills, major industrial sites, large farming operations.

The protracted fight over wind energy trumps them all.

"These issues, these structures, they go a little beyond what we normally deal with, as far as land-use jurisdiction goes," Sewell said. "This one is definitely unique."

Whitley County leaders, responding to interest by an American wind-energy company hoping to locate in the county, began working on an ordinance last year that would regulate the permitting process for wind turbines – how tall they could be, how far they would be set back from property lines, how they would be maintained.

The draft ordinance was scrapped when it was disclosed the plan commission's president, David Schilling, had signed paperwork months earlier, in the midst of crafting the ordinance, that indicated he would be willing to lease his land to a wind farm.

Sewell said the plan commission decided to begin the process anew. A committee was created to study the issue and create a report. The committee is made up of three members of the plan commission, three wind farm supporters and three opponents.

The committee's report will be taken into consideration by the plan commission in a few weeks, along with input from a consultant who was hired after the original draft ordinance had to be rejected.

Sewell sat in on all the committee's meetings, and he said he's worked hard to remain neutral on the issue, as he does with any divisive issue in his line of work. The meetings have been cordial, Sewell said, but even the eternal optimist has doubts the committee will reach any sort of consensus.

"The issue appears to come down to, 'What do you believe?'" Sewell said. "There is not one set of facts as far as the impact of any potential wind turbine or farm."

The newness of the technology, at least in the U.S., plays largely into the division.

A decade ago, Indiana was a literal blank slate on the U.S. Department of Energy's map of wind-power capacity, or how much power the turbines can produce under ideal weather conditions. It was the same in 2005, even as surrounding states showed small gains.

A lot changed in the second half of the decade. By the end of 2010, Indiana had 1.34 gigawatts of wind-power capacity, more than the 1.21 gigawatts needed to power the fictional DeLorean time machine in the movie “Back to the Future.”

Indiana’s capacity could power between 300,000 to 400,000 homes, based on calculations by the American Wind Energy Association. The organization says that because the wind does not blow all the time, it cannot be the only power source for that many households without some form of storage system.

The state has outpaced all its neighbors except Illinois, which had 2 gigawatts capacity, according to the Department of Energy’s data.

It’s been left to individual municipalities to handle how and where wind companies can locate. Indiana’s first commercial-scale wind farm opened in Benton County, northwest of Lafayette, in 2008. Allen County currently does not have an ordinance regulating wind-energy systems.

Whitley County’s Sewell said having such a short time period to reflect on how the wind farms are affecting rural residents makes it difficult to make an educated decision.

“The issues are so new,” he said. “The people who say, ‘We don’t know’ – they probably don’t.”

#### Multiple concerns

Members of Whitley County’s wind-energy study committee have agreed not to speak with media to further their cause before presenting their report this month, member Joan Null said.

Null is a member of Whitley County Concerned Citizens, the group opposed to the proposed wind development in that county.

The organization was formed by residents and property owners after Wind Capital Group proposed building its 100-megawatt wind farm (1 gigawatt equals 1,000 megawatts) in southern Whitley County.

“Industrial wind turbines are exactly that – utility-scale industrial power plants – turbines that generate electricity,” the group says on its website. “As such, they should be sited in the appropriate locations, with setbacks sufficient to have no impact on residential areas.”

The group cites multiple concerns about living near industrial wind farms, such as loss of sleep from noise and vibrations, declining property values and an effect called “shadow flicker” – the strobe-like flashing made when massive twirling blades cross the sun and create shadows.

Along the way, Whitley County opponents have gained support from tea party-affiliated groups that oppose wind-energy development from an economic standpoint. The grass-roots group Whitley County Patriots, which has urged its members to make a stand at plan commission meetings, says wind energy is ineffective and a bad value for taxpayers, echoing an argument being made around the country.

Cutting through the noise has been difficult for planners, said Clinton Knauer, DeKalb County zoning administrator.

DeKalb County last week released a draft of a wind-energy ordinance, even though Knauer said he is not aware of any imminent development in the county. Some residents have mentioned interest in lease options from energy companies, Knauer said, and that was enough for the county to take up the issue rather than wait for a Whitley County-style showdown.

“That’s why we got in front with the public and said we want public input first,” Knauer said.

DeKalb’s draft will be available for public comment through the end of this month, and it incorporates input from two public meetings. Knauer also met privately with local groups with concerns and traveled to a large wind farm to get a better sense of how the turbines look and sound up close.

Some of the meetings got heated, he said, and he was surprised at where the opposition came from – not only tea party-affiliated groups but also some environmentalists.

Most environmental groups, including the Hoosier Environmental Council, have spoken in favor of wind-energy development and said the environmental effects on land and wildlife are negligible.

Some environmentalists, however, contend wind turbines are killers of birds and bats; the U.S. Department of Energy offers research that shows more birds are killed by flying into buildings, cars, high-tension lines or communication towers – even by house cats – than by wind turbines.

Knauer said the hardest thing about crafting DeKalb County’s ordinance has been figuring out what research to rely on.

Not knowing whether research has been influenced by pro- or anti-wind lobbies, and not having historical references for how wind energy could play out in a community like DeKalb County, has made crafting an ordinance to suit DeKalb’s needs a challenge. Knauer said the DeKalb plan calls for board approval for special exceptions of tall structures, which he believes will be a saving grace for anything the ordinance might have missed.

“There’s not a lot of information out there that’s unbiased,” he said. “There’s not a lot of apples-to-apples comparisons.”

To the north, Steuben County, which passed a wind-energy ordinance in 2008, has several small-scale turbines. Building and zoning administrator Frank Charlton, who joined the planning department after the wind-energy ordinance was created, said he bought a \$25 permit with the intention of looking into wind energy at his home.

For him, it wasn’t feasible; his calculations showed it would take him 37 years just to break even. But he’s glad the county already has a wind-energy ordinance in place.

“It’s coming,” he said.

Northeast Indiana residents have only to look to the east to see what the future could look like. In 2008, Ohio signed a renewable-energy policy said to be the third-most aggressive in the country, according to the Ohio Department of Development’s Energy Resources Division.

The standard translates into at least 6 gigawatts of wind and solar capacity, enough to power 1.8 million homes, the agency said.

Indiana’s renewable-energy standards, by comparison, have been called passive by some environmental groups, including the Hoosier Environmental Council.

At the end of 2010, Ohio rated a trifling 10 megawatts on the American Wind Energy Association’s wind-capacity map. So far this year, its capacity has grown to 112 megawatts, much of that from a development in Van Wert and Paulding counties in northwest Ohio.

That ongoing project, Blue Creek Wind Farm, calls for 175 turbines, installed by Iberdrola Renewables Inc., the U.S. division of a Spanish company that is the world's largest wind-power provider.

Iberdrola Renewables said they provide northwest Ohio residents with about \$1.1 million in annual lease payments to local landowners.

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