

Company pulls plug on Boone County wind farm project

By Adam Poulisse , Staff writer

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BELVIDERE — A plan to bring wind farms to Boone County has been shelved indefinitely, according to the renewable energy company behind the project.

In a letter sent to residents who agreed to lease farmland for wind turbines, Chicago-based Mainstream Renewable Power says a more-restrictive county ordinance approved last year makes it too difficult to move forward with the six-year project.

Spurred by the concerns of some residents, the Boone County Board in **November** approved a change in the ordinance, which now requires wind turbines to be located at least 2,640 feet — or 5.5 times the height of the turbine tower — from a property line. Previously, the setback was 1,000 feet from a residence.

The County Board vote came after years of debate about whether wind farms should become a permanent part of the county landscape. Supporters said wind farms would boost the county economy, while expanding its tax base and creating renewable energy. Detractors said turbines would hurt property values, be noisy and be harmful to nearby residents' health.

"This unexpected and disappointing outcome has conversely followed years of positive discussions with the planning department and health board," the company letter said. "Mainstream and landowners alike have invested considerable time, energy and resources into this project and so such an outcome is disappointing. The North Boone Wind Farm project was founded on the basis that the strong winds and open landscapes of the region would serve as the perfect home for the wind farm. Additionally, the jobs, clean energy, and millions in tax payments over the life of the project would have been a boon to the county."

The project leases will be terminated this month, the letter states. About 50 residents signed eight-year leases in 2010, and were being paid each year, even though no wind turbines have been established in Boone County.

Deb Doetch was receiving "a few thousand" dollars each year, she said, to house a 200-foot tower on her property that measured the wind and other aspects that would determine how successful a wind farm in north Boone County could be. Doetch said it's "really frustrating" to see the project end this way. A 200-megawatt wind farm would have generated about \$1.6 million in property taxes per year to the county. "Boone County really missed on an opportunity for financial benefits and a tax base," she said. "They've done themselves a disservice."

Resident David Cleverdon pushed for the more-restrictive ordinance because he fears the potential negative effects of large wind turbines dotting the rural landscape. He said he's pleased with the company's decision to walk away from the project. "It's a positive for the county and a positive for people in north Boone County, and a responsible thing for (Mainstream Renewable Power) to do," he said. "I appreciate they realize this is not a good place to construct a wind farm. It's unfortunate it took this long to convince them."

William Randall, a Poplar Grove resident and candidate for the Boone County Board District 1 seat, said he is disappointed with the company's decision. His father began leasing family property to Mainstream before he died in 2012 to help generate county tax revenue and ensure the property remained farmland, Randall said. "Wind turbines are effective. They're green energy; it's renewable energy," Randall said. "They're all over the country. Here, they determined they were going to be a problem. At this point, it just appears it's a done deal."

County Board District 2 member Cathy Ward said the decision "is a sad financial blow for thousands of our Boone County residents," and "a blow to those of us who believe in green energy and want to lessen our dependence on foreign oil. "Not only would this project have given our landowners a chance to earn a profit from the wind towers on their land, it would also have brought millions of dollars of tax revenue for our schools, villages, townships and our county. As a county, we are facing a huge deficit this year." She said the County Board's decision to increase the setbacks was designed to stop the project.

"To deny a business a chance to come to our county and help us be financially stronger is against all our long-term plans," Ward said. Boone County Board Chairman Bob Walberg said the company is "using (the) ordinance as a scapegoat," and that there likely are additional reasons the project failed, such as a lack of participation by willing landowners. "I think they would have gone forward with it if they had the commitment they needed," Walberg said. "My thought is they could never get all the cooperation they needed."

Christopher Dorman, the company's development project manager, did not return calls seeking comment.

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