

 Ledger Independent

Future of wind turbines discussed during Mason Fiscal Court

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NextEra Energy Resources, a Florida-based company, began conducting studies last year to determine if wind turbines could be feasible in Mason and Bracken counties.

Tuesday, representatives from NextEra Energy were in Mason County meeting with local officials in an attempt to answer questions about the project.

Adam Rickel, project manager for NextEra was in attendance at the Mason County Fiscal Court meeting, which was also attended by several residents, represented by local businessman Bill Shugars.

Before Rickel addressed the audience, accompanied by Maysville-Mason County Industrial Authority Director Gene Weaver, Shugars spoke to county commissioners about his concern that all necessary information on the impact of wind turbines be reviewed before the project went further.

Judge-Executive James L. "Buddy" Gallenstein and commissioners Pat McKay IV, Annette Walters and Phil Day listened to Shugars' request that an amendment to local zoning ordinances may be necessary to provide for appropriate "setback" distance from adjoining properties. The setback distance mentioned throughout the meeting was a beginning distance of 1,400 feet, with Rickel saying that distance is a general design, but could be adjusted.

However, a setback distance of two miles was suggested by Shugars.

Shugars also questioned meetings held by NextEra with landowners and government officials. Shugars said he feels all the meetings should be open to the public, a suggestion Commissioner Annette Walters supported. McKay said he wants to hear from company officials on both the positive and negative issues related to the such a project, before making a decision to amend the land use text.

Discussion of the project following Shugars' request centered around whether or not amendments should be made at this time to the land use text, part of the Maysville-Mason County Comprehensive Plan, administered under the Joint Planning Commission, which deals with zoning issues.

Zoning Administrator Matt Wallingford said it would be the fiscal court's responsibility to direct the Joint Planning Commission on whether or not to pursue changes to the land use text.

Gallenstein also suggested before any changes or recommendations go before the Joint Planning Commission, all parties involved should educate themselves on the topic.

Though studies are ongoing, Adam Rickel, project manager for NextEra Energy, said preliminary findings for the studies show this area could be a good fit for the wind turbines.

Rickel and Mary Wells, a media relations representative with NextEra Energy, confirmed that contact has been made with local landowners in the areas of northwest Mason County and northeast Bracken County as potential hosts for 40 to 70 wind turbines.

"The main thing right now is talking to landowners," Rickel said.

While the initial footprint is large, at 10,000 to 12,000 acres as the company examines the area and determines where the best placement for the wind turbines would be, Rickel said the actual footprint is relatively small. Each wind turbine requires an acre to an acre and a half for the turbine plus access roads. Though the land would be leased for the turbines, the property could still be used by the landowner for livestock or crops.

The wind turbines stand between 262 and 328 feet tall, depending on the technology used, according to information from NextEra Energy. The wingspan of the turbine brings the total height to roughly 400 feet.

The 40 to 70 wind turbines would produce approximately 100 megawatts of energy, or enough energy to power about 28,000 average Kentucky homes.

Rickel said the company, which is a competitive energy company with approximately 95 percent of its energy coming from clean or renewable energy sources, selected this area as a study site based on various factors.

Rickel said Kentucky, Illinois, Ohio and surrounding areas are expected to see more development in coming years so these states were evaluated as possible study sites.

In selecting a site, a consultant looked at wind resources, access to transmission, competition and topography. Typically, the wind turbines are located away from rivers and wetlands, power plants and extreme changes in elevation.

It takes six to nine months for construction, however Rickel said NextEra Energy is some time out from constructing wind turbines in the area.

Even after the studies are completed, Rickel said there has to be a market for the energy.

"Eventually we have to sell the power to somebody," he said. "If it's not profitable we're not going to put them up."

On a sheet provided by NextEra Energy it lists community economic benefits, including a more than \$180 million investment in Mason and Bracken counties with approximately \$32 million in property tax revenue and \$17.5 million escalating lease payments to landowners.

Also, an approximate \$19 million will be spent on salaries and benefits for eight full-time employees to maintain the turbines after their construction.

The economic impact calculations are based on an initial 25 years.

Other benefits to the wind turbines are that they produce no air, water or ground pollution, use no water in the generation of electricity and there is compatible land use which preserves existing rural nature and agricultural use, according to NextEra.