

The Columbus Dispatch

Ohio's Greatest Online Newspaper

Wind turbines whip up debate

Ohio landowners say it's their right to erect the structures, despite criticism

Thursday, March 29, 2007 6:11 AM

BY HOLLY ZACHARIAH
The Columbus Dispatch

BELLEFONTAINE, Ohio—When he retires in a couple of years, Roger Brown plans to build his dream house somewhere on the 92 acres he owns in the Logan County countryside.

It is valuable acreage, with stands of trees and man-made trails and lakes peppering rolling hills and flat pasture. It's been in his family for six generations.

And Brown, a 55-year-old assistant to the city engineer, says he has the right to do with it what he wants.

If that includes erecting a towering wind turbine that consumes only a 15-foot circle of land yet nets him thousands of dollars each year, he says it is nobody's business.

"The rural code has always been that if a guy pays the taxes on the land and if a guy holds the deed to that land, then as long as he stays inside the law, you leave him alone," Brown said.

Such philosophizing has put him in the center of the growing debate over proposals to put electricity-generating wind turbines in western Ohio. Regional-planning officials say five energy companies are interested in building turbines in Logan and Champaign counties.

Brown's lawyer, David Watkins, represents three landowners and is negotiating with two companies that he says will pay at least \$8,500 each year plus a share of their profits for every turbine they can put on Logan County land. Brown says he knows of 22 property owners with a collective 2,000 acres interested in such a deal.

Another group of landowners, however, opposes the plans and says the green-energy benefits of wind energy don't outweigh the negatives of noise and aesthetics.

Mike Stolly lives in Jefferson Township, not far from Brown's farm. He said since word spread this winter that power companies were serious about moving in, "It's like we're in mourning. People are devastated that this will ruin our countryside."

In the heat of the debate, boards of township trustees are scrambling to decide how, or whether, to change zoning laws to control placement of the turbines.

"It's like the adult entertainment business. You cannot prohibit it, but you can regulate it," said Jenny Snapp, director of the Logan-Union-Champaign Regional Planning Commission.

The commission has recommended that trustees adopt regulations that require township approval of the turbines and, among other things, restricts them within 500 feet from primary structures and one and a quarter times the tower's height from public roads.

During a packed and raucus meeting earlier this month trustees in Jefferson Township rejected such a plan.

The wind-energy debate isn't unique to Ohio. Wind supplies less than one percent of this country's power, but the business of harnessing it is expanding. Last year, energy companies spent nearly \$4 billion to build 2,454 megawatts of new wind-powered generators, according to the American Wind Energy Association.

Spokeswoman Christine Real de Azua said any opposition to the turbines usually relates to how they change the landscape.

Though Toledo and other areas along the Lake Erie shores are studying an investment in wind power as part of the Northwest Ohio Coastal Wind Initiative, Wood County remains Ohio's wind capital.

Just west of the city of Bowling Green, on county-owned farmland that surrounds a landfill along Rt. 6, four giant turbines sprout from the ground and stretch into the sky like Jack's beanstalk.

The first turbine went online in 2003, and now the four together generate a percentage of the electricity for 10 northwest Ohio communities, including nearly 2 percent of the power consumed by Bowling Green customers.

Each 257-foot turbine generates enough power to supply about 400 homes. Local officials say that despite their size, the turbines are unobtrusive. They are featured in the local Convention and Visitors Bureau brochure.

"We like to say we have the only landfill in the country that is a tourist attraction," said Kevin Maynard, Bowling Green's utilities director. A solar-powered information kiosk at the site greets tour buses that regularly pull up carrying people who want a closer look.

The turbines closest neighbors have no complaints, either. Beverly Wilkes and her husband live in a house in the towers' footprint, and two of them rise up from behind the Wilkes' wooded and well-landscaped backyard.

Wilkes said she only hears the blades turning at night when the road noise is less.

"Woosh, woosh, woosh, like waves on the shore. It's a comforting sound," she said. "They've never given us a minute's worth of problem."

hzachariah@dispatch.com