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Wind project triggers defense of coal by Raleigh commissioner

By Mannix Porterfield
Register-Herald Reporter

A proposed wind project on Coal Mountain as an alternative to mountaintop mining triggered a defense Tuesday of the coal industry in general by a Raleigh County commissioner.

In rebuttal, both Lorelei Scarbro and Rory McIlmoil, representing the Coal River mountain wind campaign, insisted the project would open the door to an expansion of underground mining, creating more good-paying mining jobs.

"We support your project, but I don't think the commission should be put in a position where we have to support one industry over another industry," Commissioner John Aliff said.

"This is very, very difficult for us to sit here as commissioners and do that. To be quite honest, the coal industry has been good for the commission."

Aliff pointed to \$700,000 the county took in during the past quarter in severance taxes.

"A lot of those monies have been spent down in our area, incidentally, on water projects and additional deputies," he said.

McIlmoil said his group has no opposition to the coal industry but opposes the surface method used by Massey Energy since it poses a threat to a mountain that could accommodate a wind power project in the area.

"We're not asking to choose between coal and wind," he told Aliff. "But there's going to come a time when there needs to be other opportunities in this area."

McIlmoil and Scarbro pointed to a study performed by Downstream Strategies of Morgantown which indicates wind development poses a superior economic land use option than extracting coal by the mountaintop practice.

To illustrate their point, the two carried two oversized, cardboard checks, one showing Massey's job site would translate into a mere \$36,000 benefit to the county while the wind project is worth a potential \$1.7 million.

If the mountain is destroyed, they maintained, there is no way to restructure the area into "a sustainable community."

Moreover, McIlmoil told the commission, coal reserves in Raleigh County are being exhausted rapidly by the mountaintop practice.

"Wind is a better option," he said. "When you look at the fact that mining is going to be gone in 17 years and you look at the impact surface mining has on wind resources, then the wind option is just the better option for this one mountain. That's all we're saying."

Scarbro challenged the commission to prove that it imposes an equal value on residents of Coal River as it does on other parts of Raleigh County, throwing Aliff and Commissioner John Humphrey on the defensive.

"I don't believe there's great validity in the fact that we are throwing you guys out to the wolves and don't care about the western part of the county," Aliff said.

"We hear that quite often from folks down there. I don't know to what extent we have to prove we value you as much as we do everyone else. The things we've done and money we've been putting down in that part of the county would prove otherwise."

Aliff said he had "no problem" supporting the wind project but added the commission has invested much time and money in the western part of Raleigh.

Humphrey alluded to a number of water projects in communities across the western side as evidence the commission hasn't neglected the region.

In other matters, the commission:

-- Approved a \$5 million loan from First Community Bank of

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Beckley for construction of the judicial annex after no one appeared at a public hearing to speak either for or against it. The bank offered a fixed rate of 4.47 percent over 11 1/2 years with a 30-year amortization.

-- Accepted a grant of \$210,000 and a drawdown of \$6,250 for the county's homeland security mass project and \$4,589.78 for the emergency shelter.

-- Approved the lease of land from Beaver Coal Co. to the Recreation Authority that houses Burning Rock.

-- Named these individuals to boards: Margaret Agee, WRMS-EMS board of directors; Bill Roop, Recreation Authority; Dave Darnell, Planning and Zoning; John Sadowski, Building Code Appeals Board; Gerald Miller, Crab Orchard-MacArthur PSD; Bill Baldwin, Cool Ridge-Flat Top PSD; and Steve Wallen, Bradley PSD.

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