

Not in my valley, say Italy residents



Members of the Italy Town Board listen to people speak during a public hearing to rezone land to allow windmills in the town on Saturday.

Nearly 70 concerned residents and neighbors spoke out about potential rezoning for wind turbines in the Italy Valley at a public hearing Saturday. The discussion continued a forum that began at a meeting last week in which emotional residents protested the proposed changes, which would allow developer Ecogen LLC to move forward with plans for wind turbines in two areas in the southern portion of the town.

About two-thirds of the speakers on Saturday opposed wind development, said Town Board member Malcolm MacKenzie. Of those, many surmised that developers are not concerned about the best interest of the residents.

“This whole sordid affair is about one thing: Money,” said John Walsh, an Italy resident. Like several other speakers at the hearing, he mentioned the turbines recently installed in Cohocton, stressing what he considered their negative impact on hillside vistas.

Others said wind development is inevitable. The town’s best chance to reap economic benefits and secure control over that process, they said, is by approving an incentive zoning package.

The board is considering two amendments. If approved, the town would change the comprehensive plan and current zoning restrictions to allow for industrial wind turbines. Wind development has been on the table in Italy for seven years — since affiliates of Ecogen first expressed interest and began buying and leasing land for potential development.

Early on, the board opposed wind development and placed a moratorium on future projects. Ecogen sued, but the town won. However, the court advised the town to adopt an official stance on wind development, said MacKenzie. That led to a strong anti-turbine opinion in the town’s comprehensive plan. But Ecogen sued again, said MacKenzie.

The developer agreed to put that suit on hold, provided the town consider its options with regard to incentive zoning. An incentive zoning agreement would allow the turbines — Ecogen has previously stated its intent to install 20 in the town — provided Ecogen complies with agreed-upon cash rewards. Essentially, the developer would pay the town in order to go through with the project.

State law prohibits a public referendum on the rezoning, said Town Attorney Ed Brockman. The board ultimately decides whether to proceed with the wind project, but it will hold another public hearing before the town gives the developer final approval, Brockman said.

Many speakers appealed to the tranquility of the valley. Harvesting the wind that whips through the silent forests would ruin the solitude of the place, said resident Steven Brewer. And besides, said Walsh, turbines like the ones that sprouted up in Cohocton mar the landscapes residents love.

“To me, they have an evil persona,” Walsh said. “They’re ugly, disgusting pieces of steel. We don’t want them in the town of Italy.”

Jeff Hicks, an Italy Valley Road resident, agreed that they’re ugly. But he has resigned himself to their eventual construction.

“The fact is, they’re gonna be here,” he said.

State lawmakers will push the project through, Hicks said, so the town should focus on getting as much money out of it as it can. An incentive zoning package is the best way to do that, said Emerson Road resident Barb Christmas. That way, the town has the most leverage with the developers, she said.

The effect on tax rates and property values worried many residents. Would the towering turbines reduce the value of their homes? Would they bump already-high tax rates into the stratosphere? There were no answers on Saturday, but speakers like Ron Hawkins, an East Bloomfield resident and property owner in Italy, urged the residents to calm down. He has visited many towns with wind projects, he said, and has seen their impact lowering taxes and improving roads.

The board, like the residents, has struggled to appease aesthetic, economic and environmental concerns, said MacKenzie.

“We ourselves have had various changes of thought,” he said. “It’s not resolved yet.”

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