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County board will not create wind-farm protection plan

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By Travis Morse, The Journal-Standard

FREEPORT - After considerable debate, the Stephenson County Board on Wednesday agreed to remove a stipulation from special-use permits that requires the county to create a homeowner protection plan for the proposed local wind farms.

As a result of Wednesday night's action, the county will not create a plan which sets up terms by which the wind-farm companies would compensate adjacent homeowners who experience a loss in property value due to the wind towers. Two wind farms, Lancaster Wind Farm LLC and EcoGrove Wind LLC, are being proposed for the Dakota and Lena areas, respectively.

"We didn't feel the county as a public entity should be really in between the private developer and the private landowner in making these agreements," said County Board Chairman John Blum after Wednesday's meeting.

There were several motivations behind the county's decision. For one thing, the county wanted to create a homeowner protection plan to avoid litigation. With two lawsuits recently filed against the wind-farm projects, however, this is no longer a possibility.

Also, county officials say creating a protection plan sets a dangerous precedent for future economic development projects. The concern is that creating a plan for the wind-farm projects will lead to residents requesting similar documents for other projects.

"This is anti-economic development," said County Board member Jeff Mikkelsen about creating a protection plan.

In addition, Blum said that no county in Illinois currently has a protection plan in place. In counties where a plan was attempted, the initiative failed, he said. Property owners still have a legal recourse to recover damages without a plan in place, Blum added.

"We did not strip any of the legal remedies from anybody," he said.

Some board members expressed a desire to layover the plan issue until next month. A motion to table the issue failed.

Board member William Hadley expressed dismay at what he saw as another example of the board "rushing to judgment." He said more time should be taken for the board to research the wind farm issue.

"We're always rushing through things," Hadley said.

Board member Alvin Wire said it would be wrong for the county to remove the plan requirement since the county "made a promise to guarantee no loss."

Most board members, however, felt the county should not create a protection plan at this point.

During the public comment portion of the meeting Wednesday, Mike King of rural Dakota chastised the board for its decision to remove the plan requirement. King is a property

owner who lives near the proposed Lancaster Wind Farm.

After the meeting, he said that property owners like himself don't have the money to fight the wind-farm companies in court.

"Do I have the tens of thousands of dollars that are probably required to fight this in court?" King said. "Absolutely not."

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