

Wind tax abatement decision tabled

Commissioners will meet March 13 to discuss hearing

By Lindsey Erin Kroskob
Pioneer Staff Writer

The Sweet Grass County Commissioners voted unanimously March 10 to postpone a decision on whether or not to grant a tax abatement to the Crazy Mountain Wind Project.

In a separate motion, the three commissioners voted 2-1 to host a fourth meeting to discuss re-hosting a tax abatement hearing for the same project.

The March 10 meeting was one of several this month related to the possible development of 14 wind turbines on a private property near Springdale.

County Attorney Pat Dringman met with the commission board Feb. 26 and again March 3 to discuss the

What happened:

The Sweet Grass County Commissioners voted March 10 to delay a decision indefinitely on whether or not to grant a tax abatement to the Crazy Mountain Wind Project, a proposed 14-turbine wind development on private property near Springdale.

What's next:

They will again discuss whether or not to re-host a tax abatement hearing for the same project at 10 a.m. March 13 at the Sweet Grass County Annex.

validity of the original abatement hearing held Feb. 20 at the Big Timber Carnegie Library.

They intended to make a decision on re-hosting the hearing March 3, but voted 2-1 to table the decision in the hope of garnering additional information from the Montana Department of Revenue (DOR) about an administrative standard that outlines conditions for complete "new

and expanding industry" applications.

During a third meeting on the subject March 6, Commissioners Bill Wallace and Bob Faw were unable to reach a consensus, leading to a 1-1 split vote on one motion and a failure to get another seconded.

Because the commission was unable to reach an agreement and took no action, they moved forward with the

abatement hearing decision meeting scheduled for March 10 at the Sweet Grass County Annex.

Commissioner Susie Mosness was unable to attend three meetings hosted late last week due to personal issues, and asked the commissioners to postpone the tax abatement decision so she would have more time to review the public comments. The March 10 meeting was the noticed time to announce their decision, and her motion to postpone passed with no discussion.

Mosness then made a motion to schedule another meeting for the commission to discuss re-hosting the tax abatement hearing, which was originally held Feb. 20.

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Montana Clipping Service
Expedition Block
825 Great Northern Blvd. Ste. 202
Helena MT 59601
406-443-2850

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The tax abatement hearing is part of a state-mandated process that calls for a publicly noticed meeting 60 days after the county receives a completed application. In total, the commission is required to make a decision within 120 days once the full application is received or face court action.

Commissioner Bob Faw said he would not second Moseness' motion, because he believed the developer had ample time to come forward and inform the public on where the project stood since the original hearing. The commission had not heard from WINData developer Marty Wilde, so Faw said he didn't believe another hearing was necessary.

Commission Chair Bill Wallace then seconded the motion, saying that the purpose of re-noticing the meeting was not for the developer, but rather for the people to have the opportunity to be fully informed and "even the playing field."

Springdale-area landowner Jamie Moody said she spoke with Wilde, who was not at the meeting because he was out of the state. She relayed that Wilde was supportive of whatever the county believed they needed to do to "make things right."

During a third meeting March 3 on whether or not to re-host a public tax abatement hearing, County Attorney Pat Dringman advised the commission to re-host the meeting because they had not received a full application prior to the Feb. 20 abatement hearing. Instead, he said, that application was supplemented up until just before the meeting started.

"I certainly don't want you guys to perceive that anyone is taking applicants aside and trying to carry their water on this," Dringman said. "If anything, I felt like I was trying to address concerns raised by you guys and I'm trying to advise the commissioners on how to best address those. To address the opponents' concern that it wasn't complete, that's what I've been trying to do."

Landowner Jan Engwis said the main issue was that the county has no standard for how to accept applications, what to accept or what is considered a complete application.

"It seems to me that we don't know what we are doing," he said. "That creates gaps and that creates faults and that creates a precedent."

Engwis said his goal was to protect his property and that of his neighbors, and recommended working together to develop standards for the future.

"I don't think we've had appropriate input to give you the information to weigh it properly," he said. "There was secrecy and privacy on this that didn't allow this to be public until Dec. 6."

Dringman said again that he recommended re-noticing the abatement hearing, giving the developer the opportunity to add any supplemental information before it's noticed, and hosting another meeting.

The commission will discuss that topic at 10 a.m. Thursday, March 13. The decision on the tax abatement request was tabled indefinitely.