

## The View from Snowy Point

Seen from Snowy Point, the northern half of Canaan Valley is a wetland mosaic unbroken by human landmarks—but those appear in every direction when the climber turns around. To the northeast, the giant Mt. Storm power plant reaches up in tall plumes from its stacks and out in cables strung east, west, and south. Farther north, another smokestack rises beside a coal preparation plant. To the southeast, highwalls bound the Stony River Reservoir. North, east, and south, the grassy "reclamation" of strip mines is obvious. And now, along the western horizon, forty-four wind turbine towers palisade Backbone Mountain. Like all the others, this industrial landmark displays our bottomless appetite for power.

In late October, the Highlands Conservancy's board spent most of its quarterly meeting debating our position on the many proposed wind power projects. Why is this issue so contentious? Why was the vote on every motion so difficult?

Two years ago, we reached a compromise with the developers of the Backbone Mountain project and necessarily among ourselves. Moving the string of turbines north saved the view from Blackwater Falls State Park and some habitat for endangered species. However, supporters of wind power as an alternative to coal did not change the minds of those who resent its increasingly flagrant occupation of the Highlands. The work we had to do on criteria for siting was left undone. Another argument was predictable.

Our president, Frank Young, has been very active on the Wind Power Committee, which negotiated an agreement with Ned Power on its proposal for a "wind farm" on the Allegheny Front east of Snowy Point. The agreement was rejected by the board. (See Peter Shoenfeld's report in this issue.) In last month's *Voice*, Frank had asked, "If an issue-specific, scientifically and legally rational case against windmills can't be made, then why go on interminably trying to litigate against or otherwise oppose them . . .?" He was expressing the frustration of a practical man. In the absence of clearly articulated and verifiable reasons to oppose these projects, the Highlands Conservancy would seem to be a bunch of NIMBY's.

Opponents were equally frustrated. How could some people fail to see that the Highlands around Canaan Valley and Dolly Sods was the wrong place to put hundreds of three hundred-foot-tall towers? For years, the Conservancy has worked to protect the area. We would betray the trust of our members if we agreed to this new threat.

The practical negotiators used maps to show how the visual impact of the turbines would be almost nil in the Valley and on the Sods. The opponents scoffed at this nibbling around the edges. The negotiators showed how we could participate in studies of the impacts on migratory birds and other animals. The opponents said the studies would be too late.

On the question of what other actions we should take, the positions were effectively reversed. Here, the opponents were the moving parties, asserting that we should protest the permits before the Public Service Commission and possibly in the courts, while the negotiators put their feet down until we had a practical strategy with some hope of success. After all the votes on all the motions, we had reached a stalemate.

If I had to blame someone I'd point the finger at myself. Not that I'm exceptional: somewhat practical, somewhat idealistic, sometimes confused. I have a lot of sympathy for Frank and Peter, who worked hard on the agreement with Ned Power. On a different issue, Corridor H, I wore those shoes and wore out the seat of my pants, preferring to negotiate and get something rather than give nothing and get nothing. Purists have exasperated me too.

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But I'm not gung-ho for wind power. In the editorial I quoted above, Frank wrote of "a strong sentiment from our members and our board for renewable energy sources to replace the coal fired electrical power sources we so despise." Unfortunately, wind doesn't replace anything, it only adds to the supply. The more we generate, the more we'll use. The same thing happens with water: when public water is extended to homes that had their own wells, average consumption triples. When I look at the towers on our skyline, I think of plug-in toothbrushes, shoe polishers, dishwashers, security lights, TV's in every room (I could go on). Wind won't help us unless it's part of a radically different energy policy.

I also share the opponents' frustration in expressing their objections. Beyond protecting birds and bats, we have spoken only of "viewsheds." What a mincing word. I think there's another reason, harder to get at, that we see three hundred-foot-tall towers as insults to our mountains. It's a spiritual as well as an aesthetic matter: in their gross disproportion, they assert human corporate dominion over the body of nature. But that spiritual value won't prevail—for the most part, won't even be recognized—in this aggressively unnatural society. Some practical people will see it as a word game.

Twenty years ago, the North Carolina legislature took a remarkable step: it declared that "no person may construct a tall building or structure on any protected mountain ridge." Any ridge above 3000 feet and 500 feet above an adjacent valley floor was "protected." (N.C. General Statutes, Section 113A-205 et seq.) Like most laws, it was the result of a provocation. Just as the Clean Water Act didn't pass until the Cuyahoga River burst into flame, so the Mountain Ridge Protection Act had to wait until a developer built a monstrous high rise in a particularly sensitive place.

The legislature made "findings" that construction of tall buildings and structures on the higher elevations of North Carolina's mountains could be hazardous to residents and visitors. "Supplying water to, and disposing of the sewage from, buildings at high elevations . . . may infringe on the ground water rights and endanger the health of persons living at lower elevations. Providing fire protection may be difficult given the lack of water supply and pressure and the possibility that fire will be fanned by high winds. Extremes of weather can endanger buildings, structures, vehicles, and persons. Tall or major buildings and structures located on ridges are a hazard to air navigation and persons on the ground and detract from the natural beauty of the mountains."

Although the very last phrase comes closest to the reason the law was written in the first place, it wasn't practical. Sewage before beauty is the rule. It should not surprise you to know that for the purpose of this law North Carolina has defined "tall buildings or structures" *not* to include: "a. Water, radio, telephone or television towers or any equipment for the transmission of electricity or communications or both. b. Structures of a relatively slender nature . . . including chimneys, flagpoles, flues, spires, steeples, belfries, cupolas, antennas, poles, wires, or *windmills*." [Emphasis added.]

According to an October 5 article by Jim Balow in the Charleston Gazette, the federal Department of Energy has estimated the potential for wind power in West Virginia at 5,000 megawatts. The turbines going up now can generate 1.5 megawatts. We could be looking at 3,333 towers. Wind power costs significantly more than coal power, a premium some purchasers are willing to pay for "green" power. That's our leverage. If it isn't "green" it won't sell. Can we keep it "green?" We'd better resume negotiations. At the same time, we'd better address the Legislature on siting criteria. We need a law more specific than, or in addition to, a ridge protection act.

Snowy Point, a Zen garden of white sand and rock islands at the tip of Cabin Mountain, ten miles north of Dolly Sods, is not on public land. Its view is not our business in the same way as the view from Dolly Sods or Canaan Valley or Spruce Knob. But all our views are bound to change.

--by Hugh Rogers *The Highlands Voice*, November 2002