

OPPONENT TESTIMONY OF TODD WOLFRUM
Sub. HB 114
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Wednesday, June 20, 2018

Chairman Balderson, Vice Chair Jordan, Ranking Member O'Brien, and Members of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, thank you for allowing me to share my concerns with you.

My name is Todd Wolfrum and I'm in my second term serving as a commissioner in Van Wert County. In association with our neighbor to the north, Paulding County, I believe we were the first area to develop a wind farm in the State of Ohio. Although our county and two of our schools have benefited financially from the farm, this project and the potential for future wind projects has been a horribly divisive issue in our county. It is out of this experience that I am providing testimony in support of local control for the wind issue.

In the political primary this last spring in my county, a challenger ran against the incumbent for the county commissioner position. The incumbent, along with myself and our other fellow commissioner, had promised for the last several years that if the issue of tax exemptions for windmills fell to our discretion, we would put it to a vote in the affected area. The challenger ran on a promise that she would do everything in her power to bring more wind development to the county regardless of any opinion in the affected areas. She appealed to voters in the city of Van Wert who would live nowhere near the wind mills themselves and stood only to gain from the proposed projects.

Although the challenger gave lip service to some other local issues, the partisans on both sides did what they could to make the election solely a referendum on wind. The incumbent ended up getting over 70 percent of the vote promising to do what we had been promising to do all along – allow the affected area a vote on any future development.

This is not to say that over 70 percent of people in the county are opposed to wind development. The incumbent was popular and many, including myself, voted for him for reasons other than the wind issue. Sentiment is fairly strong against wind in the rural areas where development might occur but when the city and villages are thrown into the mix it may be a fifty-fifty proposition county-wide.

But a race for county commissioner is not the venue to decide this. It could very well have happened that the challenger, who really cared only about this one issue, would have had to recuse herself from any decision regarding wind farms due to her conflicts and might have never been presented with a proposal to approve or deny. Meanwhile, the county would have lost a diligent public servant who was concerned with the other hundred or so issues that we deal with in the county.

There is a better way to handle proposed wind development and that is with a direct vote on the issue itself. I am coming at this from a neutral position. Like everyone else, I understand the financial benefits of the farms. All of my constituents are well aware of the benefits as well.

But many people who live in the affected areas can list reasons they do not want them. I'm no authority on the merits of declining property values, bad health effects, or other causes raised for concern, but I do believe it is my job to represent those who feel that their quality of life is destroyed when these farms move in. Even if their opinion is subjective, it is their right to have a subjective opinion about what they enjoy about living in the country and what a detriment of a wind farm is to that.

It has been a few years since we have heard a proposal for development to consider, but the wind lobby in our county consistently spreads misinformation that we, the county commissioners, are holding up development. We have encouraged the wind proponents to negotiate with the other side. But as things stand, they don't feel they need to. They are waiting for the state to make decisions that can bypass the people in the affected areas. In our county, I can promise that we are going to do everything we can, no matter what the state does, to allow the affected area to vote, even if that means holding a straw poll at a township house to allow the will of the voters to be heard.

The unfairness of allowing the entire county to vote to put a wind farm in one or two townships is obvious. It isn't worth producing analogies – if you don't see the unfairness of burdening one lowly populated area of the county to benefit the rest, then the problem isn't with your ability to reason it's with your ability to empathize. If the people in the affected areas believe they are losing the value of their home with the introduction of a wind farm, then they are.

But moreover, conducting a vote in the affected area makes the wind farm negotiate with the people they propose to burden. When the wind farm here was built, there was a county-wide Alternative Energy Zone in place, put there by a wholly different board of commissioners. We repealed the AEZ in our county because it eliminated our ability to negotiate on behalf of our citizens. Specifically, we wanted people where the wind farms were proposed to be built to have the power to negotiate a satisfactory deal on their own terms. We have no insight on what those terms might be, but a fair negotiation and campaign by each side could determine that.

Otherwise, you get the bitterness that is in our county now. Where the wind farm exists, many feel they had no say in the process yet their rural lives were destroyed. In the areas where the farms are proposed, there are vocal groups in opposition and there is no effort by the wind companies to address their concerns. It is true that some of the opposition cannot be dissuaded just as some of the proponents cannot be dissuaded. Both sides think their only outlet is to address the county commissioners.

And that would be fine except that there is no way for us to know exactly what our people want either. The recent race for commissioner would have been a much more informative exercise if it had been the debate the pro and anti-wind forces imagined it to be. But there is a large number of people in our county, perhaps even a majority, who do not yet have a strong opinion on the issue one way or the other but would like the issue to be brought to a direct vote up or down.

I am certain that I am speaking on behalf of the other two commissioners in my county today on this issue. We fully support or any proposal that would allow the wind issue to be decided locally in the affected areas. I don't know a definition of fair that would allow any other course of conduct.