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Time is tight for wind turbine plan in Urbana

Wed, 12/08/2010 - 9:00am | [Patrick Wade](#)

URBANA – Residents worried by a University of Illinois proposal to build wind turbines near their homes are facing a tight deadline to lobby for a relocation, and the student group that conceived of the project is trying to keep it alive.

The university is planning a "public information session" sometime before Dec. 25 to share project details and gather questions and concerns from interested parties, said Morgan Johnston, the point person for the wind turbine project with UI Facilities and Services. The exact scheduling had not been determined as of late Tuesday afternoon.

That will lead to a second meeting, likely during the first week of February, when UI officials hope they can address residents' concerns, she said.

"If there is something that is brought to our attention that we're required to accommodate, we will," Johnston said.

She said UI officials have heard complaints regarding the technical aspects of the turbines – like noise and shadow effects – but she believes many of those are the result of misinformation.

"There's a lot of concerns that most likely can be addressed simply by sharing the details of the project," Johnston said.

She held off on speculating whether public input would affect the project before hearing exactly what the complaints are.

UI officials have received 12 proposals from five contractors who bid on the project, and the university will review those plans before determining how to move forward, said Melvyn Skvarla, one of the project's planners with Facilities and Services at the UI.

But nearby residents hope the proposed locations of the turbines, just south of Urbana near the intersection of Philo and Old Church roads, can still be nudged a little farther from their subdivisions before a \$2 million project grant expires at the end of May 2011.

Some residents are working on a proposal to give to UI officials, Arne Pearlstein, a member of the Yankee Ridge subdivision, told council members Monday night.

"The community, in my opinion, is overreacting," Skvarla said on Tuesday. He added that the proposed locations for anywhere between one and three turbines work.

"They had to be on our property, they had to be a certain minimum distances from Willard Airport, and they should be on relatively high ground," Skvarla said. "Presently, the location selected fulfills all three of those criteria."

Skvarla said the proposed locations are as far from Willard Airport as they can be without being too close to residential areas. There are only four houses in the immediate half-mile area, he said.

"Deerfield Ridge, or whatever it's called, is more than a mile away," Skvarla said of the Deerfield Trails subdivision, which is east of Philo Road.

"With trees from their houses, the turbines will not be visible. That's the same way with Yankee Ridge."

Redesigning those locations now, he said, could take several months.

Meanwhile, Mayor Laurel Prussing said city administrators met with university officials last week to try to find some common ground. Whether or not the university, as a state agency, would need to comply with the city's wind turbine regulations has yet to be determined. The groups are waiting for the bid proposals to be reviewed.

"All of this is going to hinge on how much money is available," Prussing said.

The wind turbine project has been budgeted at \$4.5 million, partly with money that has been raised with a student sustainability fee. Organizers also have available the \$2 million grant, which they would need to use before it expires at the end of May 2011.

Depending on where the bids come in, students told the city council on Monday, they might be able to fund one or two turbines, but it is unlikely the budget would accommodate three.

The project has been on-and-off as the university faced leadership changes and fiscal uncertainties, and right now "it is in an intensive care unit," Suhail Barot, chairman of the Student Sustainability Committee, told council members on Monday.

Members of Students for Environmental Concerns, the university group that conceived of the project in 2003, pleaded with council members to let the project continue as planned. They say a turbine's statement about sustainability will benefit the whole community.

"To redesign now would kill the project, which we know no one wants to see," said Amy Allen, a member of the student group.

Council members agreed that at least a dialogue between interested parties has begun, but as they have done in past weeks, they continued to call on the university to broaden its engagement efforts with nearby residents.

"They are the number one concern and priority when it comes to something like this," said Heather Stevenson, R-6. "To develop a plan without consulting the residents, who are going to be the most affected, is the wrong way to go about this."

Prussing said there are still some gaps to fill in the proposal.

"I'm in favor of wind turbines, but everything needs to be done right," she said. "You don't just put it next to this guy's house without talking to him."

Homeowners on Monday night said they do not believe the UI, to this point, has taken appropriate steps to study the effects of the turbines on nearby properties.

"Who knows what's going to happen," said Deerfield Trails resident Doug Wolfersberger. "But this is a classic example, I think, of this project coming to fruition and major steps being left out. When you leave these steps out, it causes these problems."

Wolfersberger wonders what will happen to some of the homes closer than his to the proposed wind farm.

"It comes down to, 'Do we sacrifice those homesteads and those people and their property because the kids worked hard on a project?'" he said. "I don't think so."

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#1

[cats kradle](#) wrote on December 08, 2010 at 10:12 am

I suppose it would be of utmost interest in Urbana whether studies reveal that these giant windmills pose any danger to cuckoo birds.

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#2

[myattitude](#) wrote on December 08, 2010 at 10:12 am

In Michigan there have been several lawsuits over this issue where they have installed the turbines causing sight and sound pollution affecting their neighbors. They are even fighting over putting them in the Great Lakes due to the impact. Out west in unpopulated areas this might not be an issue

but in the east and midwest where population density is higher these problems are going to exist.

I am sure the pilots in the area are appreciating this as well. This position seems to be in line somewhat with the approach for runway 22 at Willard.

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#3

[ROB McCOLLEY](#) wrote on December 08, 2010 at 5:12 pm

There are probably some earnest dissenters. But plenty of opposition is created and funded by competitors.

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