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Process worked with community wind

The conclusion one could reach from Kittitas County's dalliance with a community wind turbine ordinance is that the process worked.

Last week the commissioners unanimously voted to reject a proposal to allow a process to site industrial-sized wind turbines on rural properties that met specific requirements. The turbines would have been approved through the Board of Adjustment.

The process worked — not because the ordinance was rejected — but because the commissioners took a course that did not commit the county to a path it cannot yet fully envision.

What would it mean to have sparsely scattered wind-farm style turbines across the rural landscape? What would it mean for the aesthetics of the valley? What would it mean for property values?

Once a turbine is up, it's up. It will become a significant component of the landscape. We are learning more about wind turbines. The Wild Horse project has been up and operational for a few years. Two other projects are in various stages of construction or planning.

Within a year to two years, this county will know much more about what it means to have turbines as part of the landscape. In denying the ordinance the commissioners did not say they'd be forever opposed to the idea. They said they needed to know more, to learn more about the impacts. That's the appropriate approach.

Pros and cons

After a slow start to the public process, people came forward (both pro and con) to talk about the community wind ordinance. The comments were pertinent and moved the process forward.

There is an argument for allowing community wind turbines. If the placement of a turbine or two on a piece of farm land keeps that property in agriculture, that is a benefit to the county — aesthetically and economically. That is why the aesthetic argument, in particular, is not cut and dry. Agricultural lands define this county's rural aesthetic. It is a privately owned aesthetic and as such can be transformed by market factors.

Since there is no longer a rush to a decision, time can be taken to thoroughly map out how and where community turbines could be built and establish a ballpark estimate for the maximum number possible.

If these turbines could only be put up in proximity to the major transmission line corridor in the county, that influences the discussion. If there is a potential for 50, that's different than a capacity for 500.

One of the focuses of the wind farm process was to create an rationale for where the farms could be sited, both for developers and for people who may or may not decide to own land in vicinity of a wind farm. The community wind ordinance seemed to recreate the uncertainty of where a turbine might be found.

There will be people who either cheer or jeer the commissioners' decision, but the board took the appropriate tack in protecting the long-term interests of the county while allowing for a more educated decision at some point in the future.