

## Bedford's SOAR wants no wind turbines on hills

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John Beale, Post-Gazette photos

**Wind turbines** are used to produce electricity near Somerset, Somerset County.

**By Caitlin Cleary**  
**Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

BEDFORD, Pa. -- As a child, Neal Buterbaugh rode horses along the dirt roads of Dutch Corner, a basin of farmland in the crook of Evitts Mountain. With its glittering creeks, weatherbeaten barns and emerald hillsides dotted with livestock, Dutch Corner exists much as it did 100 years ago, said Mr. Buterbaugh, a semi-retired builder.

"They like the seclusion," he said of its people. "The unchanged atmosphere."

These days, however, some 21st-century changes might be in store for Dutch Corner and other areas of Bedford County. Developers are scouting the ridge tops with an eye toward building wind turbines, towering three-bladed machines which capture the wind's kinetic energy, ultimately converting it into electricity.

FPL Energy, the largest owner and operator of wind turbines in the country, is among a handful of developers studying the wind in Bedford County. According to spokesman Steve Stengel, the company is in the "very early stages" of the development process, planning the installation of just one meteorological tower on a ridge top to verify the wind.

"We don't even know if [Bedford County] is going to be a project that's going to go or not," Mr. Stengel said.

Regardless, the people are ready. In response to the interest from wind developers, a group

of citizens called SOAR, Save Our Allegheny Ridges, has mobilized to fight what it says is a threat to health, vistas, property values and tourism.

Such groups elsewhere have been criticized as "not-in-my-back-yard" types, rejecting a clean, green, emission-free technology out of self-interest. But SOAR argues the promise of wind energy is simply too good to be true, and that quaint Bedford County is not the right place for it.

Tourism is the second-largest industry in the county, behind agriculture, said Dennis Tice, executive director of the Bedford County Visitors Bureau. Retirees from Pittsburgh and the Washington, D.C., area have flocked to Bedford's tranquil "small-town America" atmosphere in recent years. But not everyone is against the concept of wind energy, Mr. Tice said.

"It has to do with scale," he said. "How many and where?"

At a meeting last month, SOAR members said people in Bedford County usually respect what takes place on private land.

"But this is just so devastating, what it'll do," said Kathy Monsour, who owns a sheep farm and operates several guest homes on her 520 acres. "This will just change our mountains forever, and it'll change Bedford County forever."

### **Not anti-windmill**

As he guided his pickup truck along the narrow asphalt arteries of Dutch Corner, Mr. Buterbaugh talked about what the landscape of his childhood would look like if surrounded by wind turbines: dwarfed, modernized, industrial. He pointed to a notch cut at the top of a nearby mountain where a meteorological tower was installed to gauge the wind.

"It's not that we're against windmills," said Mr. Buterbaugh, who bought land on Evitts Mountain 12 years ago and is building a house there. "I agree that wind is clean energy. It's their location."

The siting of wind turbines depends on topography. On ridges and hills, they usually follow the wind to higher elevations. Today's typical 1.5-megawatt wind turbine measures 213 feet from the ground to the hub, where the blades connect. Each blade is 110 feet long.

Mr. Buterbaugh's main issues with wind turbines are the aesthetics and the property devaluation he feels is sure to come. He might be able to reconcile both if only Bedford County would see some direct economic benefit from the turbines, such as lower energy prices.



**Neal Buterbaugh wants to keep wind turbines from being erected on the ridges near his home outside Bedford.**

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

SOAR members have talked about going door to door to talk with neighbors about the downside of wind turbines. They discussed approaching township officials about a land-use ordinance or a moratorium on wind development.

"It's got to stop somewhere," Mr. Buterbaugh said. "Somebody has to stand up and not sit idly by while they destroy what we see every day."

There are benefits to wind power, however. It is an inexhaustible resource. It is domestic and pollution-free. And the energy that comes from wind is fed into the nation's electrical

grid, helping to offset the amount of power that comes from globe-warming fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas.

Wind currently represents a tiny portion of U.S. energy sources, but it is growing. The U.S. wind energy industry is on track to install a record 3,000 megawatts of capacity this year.

The actual production cost is coming down to a competitive range, said Christine Real de Azua, of the [American Wind Energy Association](#), and will stabilize over time. But any wind-farm project in Bedford County would be contingent upon the extension of a federal production tax credit, which is due to expire at the end of next year, said Mr. Stengel, of FPL Energy.

This is one of SOAR and other groups' central criticisms of wind energy: That it is more expensive than other traditional energies and is heavily subsidized by taxpayers.

"Just about every energy source gets incentives of one kind or another," Ms. Real de Azua said. "It's not a market that functions without any distortions. To ask wind power to compete with established technologies with no support [is unfair]."

SOAR takes issue with the amount of tax revenue the turbines are likely to generate, calculating, for example, that Bedford Township would collect \$90 per turbine a year. The group figures the aesthetic blight of wind turbines will translate into slumping property values and less local revenue.

John Riley, chief assessor for Somerset County, differs with SOAR's negative outlook.

Somerset County features some of Pennsylvania's highest elevations, and, in 2000, was first in the state to receive wind turbines. The county now has three wind farms, the newest in Meyersdale.

"I haven't seen any property devaluation here," Mr. Riley said. "Most of [the turbines] aren't close to anybody."

It is true, however, that Somerset County's wind turbines have not generated much tax revenue, Mr. Riley said. All 34 turbines create a total of just more than \$30,000 a year, to be parceled out among the school districts and the county. Under assessment law, machinery used in the production of a commodity is not taxable, so the evaluation is based on the amount of money paid to a landowner.

"It's not a huge amount, but it's there. It's better than not getting it," he said. "Revenue is revenue, and in this day and age, you get what you can to keep government going."

According to Ms. Real de Azua, studies have shown that property values do not necessarily take a dive when wind turbines are erected. Furthermore, she said, the economic benefit to landowners is very real. They typically get from \$2,000 to \$4,000 per turbine a year. Farmers can continue to farm right up to the base of the tower.

"It allows landowners to continue with a way of life that otherwise they might not be able to continue," she said.

With five existing wind projects in Pennsylvania, generating enough power for 37,000 homes, FPL Energy is familiar with the state.

"Pennsylvania is a state that we like very much," Mr. Stengel said. "You have to have good

wind, a customer and cooperative landowners, and in our past experience in Pennsylvania, we've had all those things."

If everything goes the way they hope, Mr. Stengel said, "We're looking at a project that would come on line sometime in 2008." But first, FPL will need a permit from the township to build a wind project. Kermit Frazier, chairman of the board of Bedford Township supervisors, would say only that supervisors had not been approached by any wind developers.

"There's nothing solid yet that they're coming here," he said. "There's talk. We haven't made any decisions."

### **Concern for wildlife**

SOAR members argue that wind turbines kill bats, raptors and migratory birds. They create noise and reverberations that can be heard a mile away, can disrupt cellular and TV reception, and their blades' rotations with the sun can cause a "strobe effect" which has been linked to migraines, nausea and vertigo.

According to Ms. Real de Azua, of the American Wind Energy Association, wind turbines' affect on birds and other wildlife is low when compared with other human impacts, such as buildings with plate-glass windows, which kill more birds than wind turbines.

"The industry is very careful about monitoring sites, working on researching solutions," she said. "If you look at all the data, wind comes out very favorable."

As for wind turbines' lack of aesthetic appeal, "it's in the eye of the beholder," Ms. Real de Azua said.

"They're certainly very visible," she said. "You see them and some people see a symbol of clean energy. In some cases, they've become a tourist attraction."

In Bedford County, however, most people would probably rather stick to weatherbeaten barns and hillsides dotted with sheep in courting tourists. They worry about wind turbines' effect on the Bedford Springs project, a \$90 million renovation and expansion of the historic hotel into a four-star "destination resort."

"Our specialty is that Bedford County is small-town America with a pleasant countryside, a slower pace of life," said Mr. Tice, of the Visitors Bureau. "If Bedford County were to become one giant wind farm, I'd be sad. That's not why I moved here."

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