



Friday, February 13, 2009

## Wind turbine ordinance advances to council

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A proposed ordinance to regulate wind energy systems in Fort Atkinson was forwarded to the city council Thursday. The page-by-page analysis of the ordinance completed during the 90-minute session of the city's Ordinance Committee resulted in what the chairperson and other committee members felt was a better document.

Discussion of wind energy systems resulted from a plan recently presented to the Fort Atkinson City Council to build two wind turbines at Madison Area Technical College-Fort Atkinson. At its Feb. 3 meeting, members of the council heard details on the proposal.

School officials intend to erect two remanufactured Vestas V-17 turbines, each of which would produce 90 kilowatts of electricity atop a 132-foot tower with 23-foot-long blades on the western half of the property.

In total, the proposed turbines would tower 155 feet and could generate approximately 82 percent of MATC's electrical energy needs. To make up for the remaining 18 percent, campus officials have stated they might pursue other renewable energy sources, such as solar, sometime in the future.

Each turbine is projected to cost \$200,000 to \$250,000, with payback on the investment estimated to be in 10 years. School officials say estimates indicate the turbines might trim approximately \$8,000 off of the building's average \$10,000 electric bill each month.

Prior to advancing MATC's plan, the city moved forward with discussing an ordinance to address wind energy systems in general.

MATC officials were given an opportunity to review the proposed ordinance and submit suggestions that were incorporated into the draft presented to the committee Thursday.

In addition, during the sessions, the school's consultant, Randy Faller from Kettle View Renewable Energy in Random Lake, directed attention to multiple other areas of concern.

Faller was hired by MATC to conduct a wind energy site assessment in May. The study determined that there is enough constant wind at the westside property to allow for the use of up to two wind turbines.

Primarily, Faller was seeking the committee to lessen the impact of some of the more strict portions of the ordinance and those that actually would not apply due to current regulations of a federal agency.

The committee was very deliberate in its debate and analysis of the document, taking into consideration any suggestions brought forward by MATC, Fort Atkinson city engineer Jeff Woods and its own members.

As discussion proceeded, councilperson Jim Simdon acknowledged that he is in favor of MATC's efforts in placing the two wind turbines and the potential benefits of such a project.

"I also know this is the first one of what's going to be more to come here," he said. "We've been through this other times when these things are developing and in the process of it developing, everybody is out to save money and make money and do it cheap and do it wherever."

The councilperson noted that if he did not believe that was going to be a problem, he would have no qualms about making the ordinance a one-page paragraph and moving ahead with the MATC project.

"I think we all know it doesn't work that way," Simdon said. "We're not trying to be imperative on this thing; we're just trying to look down the road to see who can think up something different the next time around."

Issues debated by the committee included the setback and telecommunication interference.

As originally proposed, setback for the structures were at a distance of no less than 125 percent of total structure height.

Faller said 125 percent of total height was above and beyond any model ordinance in Wisconsin

"There has not been any precedence to show these systems have fallen over and gone beyond the total height, nor have any fallen over," he said.

Faller questioned whether there was any basis for establishing the setback for 1.25 times the height of the structure.

"To error on the safe side, I would hate to be the first one to have to deal with it," councilperson La Verne Behrens said.

She said she had no issue with the 100 versus the 125 percent, but simply expressed concern with Fort Atkinson having to deal with the first time there was an issue of a collapse or structure failure.

"It's speculative, as is most of this, because we're dealing with something we've had no experience with," Simdon added.

Across Wisconsin, setbacks in other communities with wind energy ordinances have never been set higher than 110 percent.

"Not that you can't do that; it just is more aggressive than has ever been done before," MATC district architect Fred Brechlin said.

The stricter setback would prevent MATC from positioning the turbines equidistant from the property lines.

"From an aesthetic standpoint, it's not going to look as good when the product is finished," Brechlin said.

Recognizing the structures are not designed to fall and setting the setback at 125 percent would be detrimental to the city's pilot project, the committee relented and agreed to forward a recommendation for the setback to be

equal to the height of the structure.

Faller also addressed a provision within the ordinance about potential interference with telecommunications.

"There is no proven documentation as to its effect to cellular, wireless or any other types of communications," Faller said, encouraging the committee to remove that portion of the ordinance.

Some wording of the specific section was altered; however, keeping in mind the interests of the city, references to the Fort Atkinson Municipal Airport remained.

The revised ordinance is slated to be considered by the full Fort Atkinson City Council at its March 3 meeting.

Prior to the unanimous vote, the committee heard from two members of the public.

Former councilperson Bill Camplin addressed the committee about what he considers to be the importance of the MATC proposal.

"We have many advantages in Fort Atkinson that are not afforded in a lot of areas of the Midwest which are not experiencing growth and sustainability that we are," he said. "I think wind energy and other alternative energy proponents are really very important."

Camplin said that advancing projects with wind energy and other alternative energy sources is an opportunity for the community to be at the center of the future systems and solutions.

"I think it can help bring growth and at least some sustainability to our community," he added. "It's really attractive and makes a wonderful statement to have something like this. It shows a progressive quality in the community, given the events that are taking place in the Midwest and in the world."

Camplin suggested that Fort Atkinson's approval of such a project could have positive repercussions.

"There is going to be a lot of growth in the energy field and we have a chance of being right on top of it," he said.

Fort Atkinson Industrial Development Corp. President Sheldon Mielke agreed. However, he also said it was difficult to separate the ordinance from the MATC project.

Citing an article in the Wednesday, Feb. 4, Daily Union that quoted councilperson Mark Zastrow as saying, "I would suggest we not be in a rush to put an ordinance together that would be catering to this one proposal," Mielke cautioned the committee to not design the ordinance in such a way that it would slam the door on the MATC proposal.

He noted that the Daily Union article cited four people as being opposed to the MATC project.

"This is not the only public input to this project at MATC because the Fort Atkinson Industrial Development Corp. has passed an ordinance that totally supports the project MATC wants to put forward," Mielke said.

Echoing Camplin, he said there likely would be many more wind turbines and other alternative energy sources.

"As the growth of the wind industry continues, related businesses will also grow and the demand for trained workers to maintain the increasing numbers of generators will increase," Mielke said. "The educational component of the MATC project will help supply these trained workers."

He said the educational aspects of the project are among the most important part of the projects.

"Installation of wind turbines at MATC will show at least this part of the state that Fort Atkinson is progressive and concerned about these things," Mielke said.

MATC-Fort Atkinson officials initially approached the topic during a Fort Atkinson Planning Commission meeting on Aug. 12. At that time, they alerted the commissioners that they were investigating the feasibility of installing two wind turbines towering up to 165 feet, including the blades, above ground on the campus' western lawn.

The project is being studied in the wake of MATC President Bettsey Barhorst signing onto the "American College and University President's Climate Commitment." Those who inked the commitment pledge to fight against global warming by integrating sustainability into their curriculum and by modeling ways to eliminate global warming emissions.

An educational component also is in play with the proposed turbine installation.

Currently, MATC offers credit and non-credit educational programming, including a renewable energy certificate for careers in the field.

Courses might be expanded to offer associate degrees in the field and could make the Fort Atkinson campus the flagship location for MATC's renewable energy programs.

The turbines could be used for hands-on educational purposes for maintenance and perhaps even installation if and when they are erected, MATC has noted.

The draw for the program is a projected increase in the need for workers in the expanding renewable energy field.

Madison Area Technical College-fort Atkinson is not alone when it comes to pursuing renewable energy and wind turbine education at technical colleges in Wisconsin. Currently, Lakeshore Technical College in Cleveland, Nicolet Area Technical College in Rhinelander and Milwaukee Area Technical College also have wind turbines.

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