

## Public opposition has helped block three proposed wind farm projects in past 8 months

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Three proposed wind energy projects have seen significant public opposition over the past year.  
(Republic file photo)

Public outcry may have stopped another area wind project in its tracks.

The South Dakota Public Utilities Commission will consider approving the withdrawal of a permit to build a 100-turbine wind farm in Charles Mix and Bon Homme counties after hearing significant resistance from the surrounding communities. The withdrawal will be considered at Tuesday's meeting at the Capitol Building in Pierre.

Prevailing Winds LLC, the company planning the project, filed its application for withdrawal in late August based on claims that "misinformation has been circulated about the project." If Prevailing Winds declines to file another permit application for the project, it would be the third wind farm in eight months to be rejected by nearby residents.

Since February, both the Davison County Commission and Letcher Township's Board of Supervisors have made moves to block proposed wind turbines in their respective areas. If the PUC approves the withdrawal Tuesday, Avon residents could join their neighbors to the north in turning down a nearby wind farm.

And PUC Chairman Chris Nelson said public opposition to a project like Prevailing Winds' in Avon project is a new occurrence.

"In the past, the wind siting applications that we have dealt with have not generated significant opposition," Nelson said. "In the time that I've been a commissioner for the last six years, I've only dealt with one of those prior to the Avon one, and that one, literally, there was no opposition to that particular application."

The PUC only reviews wind projects larger than 100 megawatts, and the most recent project it considered was the construction of the Willow Creek Wind Energy Facility in Butte County.

The Butte County project in western South Dakota drew virtually no opposition, according to Nelson, but recent projects in south central South Dakota have been a source of debate among locals.

Nelson, who attended a public input meeting in Avon that attracted 300 spectators, said the Prevailing Winds project has drawn more attention than the project located more than 350 miles west in Newell.

"The considerable opposition that was raised at the public input hearing in Avon was certainly very different than what we experienced in Newell last year," Nelson said.

One opponent to the project, State Sen. Bill Van Gerpen, R-Tyndall, sees a few reasons for recent public uproar about nearby wind farms, particularly those as large as 100-turbines.

"When you drive out of Avon currently, there's just a beautiful view to the north, a beautiful view of the valley," Van Gerpen said. "I think some are concerned about what the towers would do to take away that beautiful act of creation."

And Van Gerpen isn't surprised about the reaction from locals.

Van Gerpen also attended the public meeting in Avon, where he said he met people who had recently moved to the area from out-of-state. Van Gerpen said many of these new South Dakotans moved to the area because of the rural atmosphere, where there is a view of the prairie, plenty of hunting and fishing opportunities and where the bustle of city life isn't an issue.

He was also worried the division between supporters and opponents of the Prevailing Winds project could splinter the "strong, strong community" of Avon.

Following recent rejections of smaller scale projects in Davison and Sanborn counties, Van Gerpen was surprised to see Prevailing Winds attempt to bring another wind project to south central South Dakota.

"I am surprised," Van Gerpen said. "There's so much territory in this country that is open land and not near communities. When you get within two or three miles of a small town with towers, I think you need to expect opposition."

In Davison County, the County Commission sided with the public when considering a \$40 million project to construct a 9- to 11-turbine wind farm. Since the project would have generated less than 100 megawatts, it was left to the county to approve or deny.

Months after the Davison County project was rejected, Minnesota-based Juhl Energy began pitching a similar project a few miles north of the county line in Letcher.

But the small township of Letcher did not prove welcoming to Juhl Energy, and later passed a setback to bar any wind tower larger than 75-feet tall from being constructed within 5,280 feet from the nearest residence. The township also established a 1,500-foot setback from the nearest neighbor's property line.

Despite recent objections from nearby counties and substantial opposition in Avon, mass public disapproval may not play a major role in determining the success of a project like the one proposed by Prevailing Winds in Avon.

Nelson said the three PUC commissioners are elected to serve in a judicial capacity, analyzing the facts of each given case and determining whether the proposed project falls within state guidelines.

"When we have these applications, it's not a question of, 'Does the PUC support wind energy or not?' That's not the question," Nelson said. "The question is, as I've stated, 'If the project is built, can it maintain and comply with those criteria that are established by state law?' "

Essentially, Nelson said, the PUC weighs the facts of each application to decide whether it can be built while maintaining the health, safety, welfare and economy of the area where the project is built.

But, Nelson said, the public input hearings provide valuable guidance to the PUC. Nelson said the primary purpose of the meetings is to understand the concerns and opportunities of the project, then use what they've learned during the meeting to formulate questions for the applicant.

"Now having said that, do I always want to know what are the people of South Dakota thinking? Absolutely," Nelson said. "But at the end of the day, our decisions come down to facts and law."

If the withdrawal is accepted Tuesday, residents local to Avon may rest easy for a short time. But the project isn't necessarily dead.

According to the motion for withdrawal, "Prevailing Winds is moving to withdraw the application to allow Prevailing Winds to better inform the community on the wind project and allow Prevailing Winds to revisit its options regarding the project."

Lisa Schoenfelder, a Wagner resident who said her property would be within one mile of seven of the proposed turbine locations, hoped the company would come back with a proposal more suitable to locals.

While Schoenfelder isn't opposed to alternative energy projects, she said the proposed turbine sites were close to the homes of several landowners, and she believes Prevailing Winds was surprised by the organized effort of locals to oppose the project.

If Prevailing Winds comes back to the PUC with a new proposal, Schoenfelder hoped it includes some new turbine site locations.

"In my heart, I would like to believe that they are ethical and are really considering the best well-being for those people who live in that area, and that they will come back at some point with a more reasonable solution," Schoenfelder said. "The opposite would be that they are just trying to figure out how to better put together a case to continue their existing plan."