

## Poll: Lincoln County supports wind energy

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Jonathan Ekechi, left, and Joshua Richter work on installing a deck plate for a wind turbine cell near Pipestone, Minn., Friday, Oct. 29, 2010.(Devin Wagner/Argus Leader)(Photo: Devin Wagner - Argus Leader)Buy Photo

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A plan to bring 150 wind turbines to Lincoln County has strong support, according to a scientific poll commissioned by the company backing the project.

Dakota Power Community Wind's poll from GOP pollster Public Opinion Strategies showed that two-thirds of voters support a wind energy project in southern Lincoln County.

Democrats, Sioux Falls residents and those with a college education were most likely to show strong support for wind energy, but the poll found support across the political spectrum. Only voters in the project footprint were opposed, but only by a slim majority.

The company released partial results from its poll in the run-up to a county commission vote on wind turbine setbacks that would doom the project if left unchanged. Commissioners could decide as quickly as Tuesday morning.

The company has vowed to take the issue to a referendum if it requires turbines to be placed a half mile from existing homes.

Brian Minish of DPCW said the rules would essentially ban commercial-scale wind development. Minish said the poll was meant to test the waters for a public vote if and when the rules are finalized.

“We needed to know this before we went in to do a referendum,” Minish said.

The director of the county's anti-turbine group says the poll results can't be trusted, as they were collected on behalf of DPCW.

“We'll take all of that with a great amount of salt,” said Winnie Peterson, Director of We Care-SD. “Some people were very upset about the way the information was presented.”

We Care's volunteers conducted door-to-door surveys in 2015, and Peterson said more than 80 percent of those surveyed within the area of the original 500-turbine project said they didn't want to live within a quarter mile of a turbine.

Former President Jimmy Carter said Wednesday millions of jobs could be created in the United States if President Donald Trump embraced renewable energy sources such as geothermal, solar and wind power. (Feb. 8) AP

“As people from South Dakota, we don't need to hire a fancy Washington polling agency to find out what our neighbors think,” Peterson said.

The poll from GOP strategist Glen Bolger's Washington, D.C.-based agency is the first survey of Lincoln County voters specific to wind energy. National polls consistently show support for wind power and other forms of renewable energy.

The questions were asked of 300 registered voters, with 120 cell phone interviews by telephone March 23-26, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 5.66 percent.

On the question “Would you support or oppose a plan to build wind turbines to generate electricity in the southern part of Lincoln County?” surveyors found 41 percent strongly in favor, 26 percent somewhat supportive. Thirteen percent were somewhat opposed and 17 percent strongly opposed.

The only area where opposition outnumbered support was in Commission District 2, which includes the proposed wind farm's footprint. Results there were 50 percent opposed and 46 percent in favor.

The company got stronger results with a leading question: “Would you support or oppose building between 95 and 150 wind turbines in Lincoln County, which will produce three hundred megawatts of energy that will be used in South Dakota and other nearby states into South Dakota? If allowed, the plan would bring 25 million dollars directly into Lincoln County's tax revenue.”

When couched in terms of benefits, strong support jumped to 45 percent, somewhat supportive moved to 27 percent, and the somewhat opposed category fell to 8 percent. Strong opposition remained the same.

The leading question returned 53 percent support in Commission District 2.

Minish said the poll is proof that commissioners are ignoring voters by delaying action on turbines and passing restrictive ordinances.

“Every time they make it more of a burden, they are going against the will of the people,” Minish said.

Peterson said the wording of the leading question negates the answers.

"We obviously disagree with a lot of those numbers," Peterson said.

The people could ultimately decide.

After more than two years of debate, commissioners tabled the half-mile setback ordinance in April, having deferred action on the matter since December. Commissioners could also choose setbacks of one mile or three-quarters of a mile.

If the commission passed the ordinance, the company would have 20 days from the date of publication to gather signatures for a vote.

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