

Lincoln County wind vote could spark referendum

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The Lincoln County Commission voted to keep wind turbines at least a half mile from homes on Tuesday, setting up a push for a referendum by wind energy investors.

The 4-0 vote for a half-mile setback was the least restrictive of three options available to commissioners, but it was still too restrictive for Dakota Power Community Wind's plans.

"We'll take it to a vote," said Brian Minish of DPCW.

Minish has said that a half mile setback would doom the project, initially envisioned as the largest in South Dakota.

Opponents of the wind project called the half-mile proposal an improvement over the current standard of three times the turbine height, but they'd pushed for a mile.

"It's better than the ordinance we have now, but it isn't adequate to protect the health and safety of the county," said Winnie Peterson, director of We Care-SD, the Canton-based opposition group.

Investors and opponents have sparred over the county's rules for wind siting for nearly three years.

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Tuesday's vote was the latest in a series of revisions, which includes limits on shadow flicker from spinning towers and volume restrictions that require steady volume of 45 decibels or less at property lines.

The planning commission initially endorsed a one-mile setback in October of 2016, but commissioners debated, then twice tabled, proposals for a half mile and three-quarters of a mile.

Commissioner Jim Schmidt had asked that the final vote be postponed for a week in order to set it for an evening meeting, but Commissioner Michael Poppens urged his fellow officials to cast a vote Tuesday morning.

Poppens said they'd heard plenty of testimony, and that both sides were anxious to see action taken.

"Delaying for a week is just delaying," he said. "I don't want to be part of a system that's a system of delay,"

In order to bring a referendum on the setback issue, the wind project's backers would need to gather 1,732 signatures within 20 days of the ordinance's publication in the last of four legal newspapers in the county.

The vote would be open to the entire county, including all of Sioux Falls south of 57th Street.

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Minish's organization commissioned a poll from Public Opinion Strategies that showed a majority of Lincoln County voters supporting wind energy in all but one of the county's commission districts.

Peterson balked at the sponsored poll, however, pointing to anti-project petitions circulated in 2015 as proof of its unpopularity in the area targeted for development.

She said Tuesday that the nonprofit plans to reach out to voters in Sioux Falls if the referendum effort is successful.

We Care-SD volunteer David Brouwer said it's important for Lincoln County voters north of Canton to recognize that a less-restrictive ordinance leaves the door open to development in the entire county, including Sioux Falls, Tea, Harrisburg and Lennox.

"This affects everyone," said Brouwer.

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