
Which way does the wind blow?

By Odessa Admin

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Ector County Commissioners will vote Monday on a 10-year tax abatement for the Ector County portion of Duke Energy's Notrees Wind Farm.

The company plans to build 11 1.5-megawatt turbines in phase 1B of the project in Ector County. The remainder of the 40 wind turbines would be built in Winkler County.

The agreement calls for a 60-percent county property tax abatement for the wind farms first five years and a 40-percent abatement the second five years, said Gary Vest, economic development director for the Odessa Chamber of Commerce.

In November, the county approved a reinvestment zone for the wind farm, which set boundaries for the tax abatement.

This could be the first of a number of abatements needed for the project, Vest said.

"Duke has plans for four phases," Vest said. "A lot of the future turbines should be in Ector County."

And Project Invenergy and other companies are also interested in building turbines in the county, Vest said.

Abatements are needed because the Ector County Independent School District can't lower its tax base below \$80 million, Vest said. In Andrews County, the school district has a tax base of \$20 million, while it's \$10 million in Winkler County.

While Vest said the tax situation is something Ector County will need to deal with, it does have positives to offer companies.

"The advantage is we do have some good sites in Ector County," he said.

In November, Commissioner Greg Simmons cast the only vote against the reinvestment zone, but that was before Commissioner Dale Childers took office.

The future of wind energy, as well as projects like Summit Power's proposed \$2.8 billion coal-gasification plant planned for Penwell, became a bit clearer with the Public Utility Commission of Texas's recent approval of 13 companies to build the nearly \$5 billion project to triple the state's electric transmission capacity.

Dallas-based Oncor will take on the largest chunk of the project, receiving \$1.34 billion. Wind Energy Transmission Texas and the Lower Colorado River Authority will construct the portions of the certified renewable energy zones being built closest to Odessa.

Wind Energy Transmission Texas, a joint venture between Spanish company Isolux Corsan and Brookfield Asset Management, will receive \$402 million for its portion of the energy zone, which includes lines in Midland, Martin and Howard counties, in the Central West zone.

The Lower Colorado River Authority, which provides power to Central Texas, will receive \$750 million for its part of the project, which includes connecting Ector County with wind farms in the McCamey zone.

A final order will be issued in about a month for the general paths, PUC spokesman Terry Hadley said.

“Once the final order is issued, these entities will file specific applications for certain layouts for the lines,” he said.

That process should continue through October, Hadley said. Barring protracted disputes with landowners over building the lines, certificates for construction should be awarded sometime in 2010, with construction beginning after that.

While Vest said the transmission system in Ector County is already strong, the new projects will help eliminate “bottlenecks” between West Texas and the state’s metropolitan areas.

“Those things don’t go up overnight,” he said. “It’s very important for all of West Texas.”

Also Monday, county commissioners will consider adopting a countywide burn ban. Last month, they let a similar motion die without a vote over the objections of West Odessa Volunteer Fire Chief Jimmy Ellis.

Ellis said the commissioners allowed the motion to die because burn bans are unpopular with voters.

Commissioners last adopted a burn ban last summer, which they lifted in August.

In other action, commissioners will consider:

>> Recognizing David R. Austin as a recipient of the “Jerry Ware Leadership Award” for his dedicated service and leadership from the Texas Association of County Auditors.

>> Discussion on the progress being made regarding bilingual issues and voter outreach initiatives.

>> A report regarding the initial public meeting and authorize application for grant funding through the Office of Rural and Community Affairs for the 2009-2010 application cycle and authorizing County Judge Susan Redford to sign the necessary documents.

>> Ratifying the Sponsor’s Selection Committee Ranking for the Runway Rehabilitation project.

>> Taking any necessary action regarding a donation of a Mita Copier to Ector County from Jim & Cindy Nutter.

>> Approving or taking any necessary action regarding the donation of a Ford pickup from the County Attorney’s office to the County Pool.

>> Approving or taking any necessary action regarding the donation of a 35-inch television for viewing evidentiary videos to the County Attorney’s office from Joe and Martha Connally.

>> Approving, rejecting or taking other actions regarding the Sole Source list of vendors.

>> Taking any necessary action regarding the renewal of a maintenance contract with Lason for a Minolta Microfilm

Reader Printer and authorize the Redford to sign.

>> Approving or taking any necessary action regarding Memorandum of Understanding between Texas Forest Service and Regional Incident Management Team Member Gino Solla and the Ector County Health Department and authorize the Redford to sign.

>> Consider, discuss or take any necessary action regarding a request to hire above Step 5 for a posted position in Post Sentence Monitoring Department.

>> Consider, discuss or take any necessary action regarding the installation of carpet in the County Attorney's office.

>> Transferring \$1,070.00 from Departmental Furniture & Equipment to DP Software Maintenance at Ector County Cemetery.

>> Transferring \$5,000.00 from Grantee Contribution to Educational Travel at the Ector County Health Department.

>> Transferring \$82.00 from Telephone to Equipment Rental in the auditor's office.

Annette Snowden, Auditor's Office

>>Transferring \$2000 from Full Time Salaries to 001-425-5105 Contract Services in post sentence monitoring.