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County Allows Wind Farms in Cypress Hills

By Shirley Bray

Cypress County is allowing wind turbines in the buffer area around Cypress Hills Provincial Park, known as the Fringe. On June 7, a month and a half after a public hearing on April 19, the County unanimously passed third reading of an amendment to its Municipal Development Plan and Land Use Bylaw which deals with Wind Energy Facilities (WEF) in the County.

In spite of allowing WEF in the Fringe, the Council has been responsive to opponents of such facilities in this buffer area. The Council has created two classes of WEF, one for outside the Fringe area and one for inside, each with its own development standards.

The Council plans to make all decisions about WEF within the Fringe. Although WEF proposals, inside or outside the Fringe will be subject to a public hearing, there will be no appeals on decisions in the Fringe. Instead, the Council will hear evidence from both sides of the issue, and issue written reasons for their decision.

Interestingly, the amendment says that Council "will have due regard to the policies, guidelines and intent of the Cypress Fringe Area Structure Plan (see *WLA*, April 2005). WEF must be designed and located to minimize the impact on the environment and be consistent with the objectives" of the Fringe plan.

Recall that the vision for the Fringe is to protect, within 20 years, the majority of the fescue grasslands and the mixed-aspen montane outside the Park as unbroken ranchland for the long term. "This is the legacy of visionary citizens," states the Fringe Plan.

Applicants with WEF proposals within the Fringe must submit an environmental review of the WEF, a digital terrain model that assesses the visual impact on the natural scenery, landscape character, and cultural landscape of the Fringe and adjacent area.

The amendment states " WEF should not be permitted in those portions of the fringe area that in the opinion of Council are prominent for their scenic character and natural values, but may be considered in less sensitive areas of the fringe area."

Public Hearing Points

The public hearing in April brought out a number of people on all sides of the issue. At that time, the Council had worded a bylaw amendment that stated that WEF would not be allowed in the Fringe. Since this was unexpected, it created confusion as to how people should present their argument.

Clearly, those opposed to wind farms in the Fringe would have nothing to say, while proponents would have plenty. West WindEau owner, David Boileau, had already had hours of the Council's time in making presentations regarding his proposal to build a wind farm in the Fringe. Reeve Jack Osadczuk told participants just to state their case and the Council would figure it out. However, everyone was restricted to a five-minute time limit, which was considered unusual.

Although the contracts that Boileau had made so far with four residents were confidential, it was known that signatories were required to come to the public hearing and speak in support of wind farms. A few other ranchers in the area seemed to speak generally against the Fringe Plan, believing it was an





infringement on their right do with their land as they pleased, even though the Plan was developed with public input over several years.

Among those who made presentations that opposed wind farms in the Fringe were Cliff Wallis and Cleve Wershler, environmental consultants who have both done many years of research in the Cypress Hills, Phil Horsch of the Grasslands Naturalists, Julie MacDougall from Cypress Hills Provincial Park, two landowners Henry Binder and Paul Heune, and myself.

I spoke to the Council both as a representative of AWA and as a rural Albertan facing an invasion of coalbed methane development in Wheatland County, east of Calgary. I told the Council that they were lucky because they had a choice about allowing WEF in the Fringe, whereas landowners have no choice about having oil and gas wells on their land. I reminded them of the Pekisko ranchers who are fighting to retain the integrity of their grasslands in the face of potential drilling by Compton. I urged them to remember the legacy of those visionary citizens who created the Fringe plan.

Paul Heune, chose to live in Cypress County because of its “unspoiled vistas, wildlife, quiet, clean air,” escaping the noise, pollution and traffic of Calgary. His job allowed him to relocate to a more remote area. Among many other points, he proposed that Council ban WEFs throughout the entire county.

“I realize this is a huge step which screams in the face of conventional wisdom; however, banning this type of development provides significant economic benefits to the County and its residents, which far outweigh those presented by the industrial developers of wind farms.”

Heune pointed to the research of Dr. Thomas Power, of the University of Montana, and author of *Post-Cowboy Economics*. “As people such as myself decide that the quality of our lives is not decided by how much money we make but by the environment we live in, the communities we work in and the relationships we have with our neighbours who have values which are consistent with our own, we will see Cypress County grow.

“It will in fact become what it once was—an area where many quarters have a home on them where livestock is raised for personal consumption, or sold locally, and where the rural towns become vibrant communities providing goods and services to those in the outlying areas.”

Henry Binder discussed the myths of the benefits of wind farms, emphasizing that they were industrial developments, no matter how beautiful or green they were. He pointed out that those with wind turbines on their property would benefit from extra revenue, while their neighbours without turbines might see their land devalued. Wind turbines, he said, should not be located around parks or in natural areas, but should be treated as any other industry and located where they least interfere with other land uses.

“Any land use change in the area,” he said, “should recognize the Hills as a powerful engine for future growth that will promote economic prosperity for the whole region. All we need is sound planning to retain the natural features which make our County a desirable place for people to live and work. Surprisingly, we are now thinking of marring this powerful natural and economic feature with wind turbines.”

The Fringe plan, he said, recognizes the value of the natural landscape in the area, and the County was fortunate to have such a study already completed. “If we have faith in [the Plan] and just carry on from there, by applying its spirit and intent we will be doing the right thing for the County.”

David Suzuki Wades In





Near the end of the hearing, Boileau made his presentation. He not only took up his allotted five minutes, he then proceeded to read an article by David Suzuki on “The Beauty of Wind Farms,” using it as an endorsement for his wind farm proposal.

In the article, Suzuki claims he would gladly share the beautiful view he has from his cabin on an island off the coast of British Columbia with a wind farm, and laments that he seems to be in the minority. He cites a number of groups and individuals who are complaining about the location of wind farms.

“In Alberta,” he wrote, “one group is opposing a planned wind farm near Cypress Hills Provincial Park, claiming it would destroy views of the park and disturb some of the last remaining native prairie in the province.”

A number of us wrote to Suzuki, explaining the issue of wind farms in the Cypress Hills in more detail. We were concerned about his emphasis on beauty, which we thought was a red herring. Debate on whether wind turbines are beautiful in the Cypress Hills was taking the focus off their real impact—industrialization of the landscape. None of us appreciated being lumped in with hypocritical and counterproductive complainers. We were clear that we were not opposed to wind energy and that there were many other more appropriate places in the County for wind farms.

However, we knew that Suzuki’s intent was not to undermine our arguments. We agree with him that “wind farms should not be allowed to spring up just anywhere,” that environmental assessments for wind projects are essential, and that renewable energy sources are critically important.

“We are working towards the same goal,” he responded in a letter, “to protect the diversity of nature and improve the quality of life, now and for future generations.”

We were pleased to see a subsequent article by Suzuki in the *Lethbridge Herald*. In this article he focused clearly on the importance of siting wind farms properly “where they can have the greatest positive effect with the smallest environmental footprint. After all, the whole point of clean energy is to reduce our environmental burden, not make it worse.”

Now the managing editor for the *Medicine Hat News*, deciding that “wind turbines are ugly and inefficient,” is suggesting that a nuclear option should be investigated!

Niagara Chooses Protection

With Ontario establishing a priority on renewable energy resources, parts of the Niagara Escarpment, a World Biosphere Reserve, were pinpointed as favorable locations for wind farms. However, the Niagara Escarpment Plan “seeks to ensure that development is compatible with the physical, environmental and scenic resources of the Escarpment” (Policy Report, Oct. 2003).

Its purpose is the same as the *Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act* (NEPDA): “to provide for the maintenance of the Niagara Escarpment and land in its vicinity substantially as a continuous natural environment, and to ensure only such development occurs as is compatible with that natural environment.”

Two of the objectives are “to maintain and enhance the open landscape character of the Niagara Escarpment in so far as possible by such means as compatible farming or forestry, and by preserving the natural scenery; to ensure that all new development is compatible with the purpose of the Plan.” These objectives are very similar to those of the Cypress Hills Fringe Area Structure Plan.

After public input, the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) voted unanimously that “industrial-type wind power developments should not be permitted in the Niagara Escarpment Plan.” It also reserved the





right to comment on any adjacent project. The NEC is amending the NEPDA so this recommendation will become law, not just policy. The NEC is highly respected worldwide, and this decision is an important planning precedent in Canada.

Dawn Nichols, a Director of Planning and Municipal Relations for a local Ontario residents' group, Blue Highlands, wrote to AWA with this and other valuable information and to tell us about her own battle with Superior Wind Energy, Boileau's former company. She was not impressed with Boileau's lack of respect for the protected areas. Boileau had not only tried to open the Escarpment for wind development, but was also involved in a project off the coast of Lake Erie, between two important bird sanctuaries.

