NEWS

Moratorium from front: Wind tower discussion draws largest crowd in decades

jurisdiction change might affect rural neighbors and whether the city could annex the land, which would redirect tax revenue.

Representatives from Ørsted, including development director David Okuwobi, appeared before the board seeking an amendment to Section 7.1.4.5 of the county zoning ordinance. The company asked the county to reduce its three-mile setback for wind turbines near non-participating residences to one mile, saying the current rule would eliminate over 30 turbines from the planned Badger and Elba projects.

Okuwobi said Ørsted had already redesigned layouts to honor a one-mile buffer for all non-participating homes and argued the amendment was necessary for financing and project viability. He stressed the company was "not asking to change the entire zoning ordinance—just this section."

Board members pushed back, citing strong public opposition and the extensive work that went into adopting the current ordinance in January. "We just got through… developing a document," one member said. "And now, two months later, we're supposed to amend it?" Another added, "We put that three-mile [setback] in there to protect those homeowners… you've got to work with those individuals out there."

No motion was made to amend the ordinance. "I'm going to say it's not moving forward due to lack of motion," Rohweder concluded.

During public comment, resident Mike Meier presented a petition urging the county to maintain the current setbacks for wind towers, data centers and solar projects. The petition had gathered 374 signatures since the previous Friday. "This is your support," Meier told the board. "We're not going to stop either."

Residents also raised questions about the long-term viability of data centers, whether wind-energy revenue offsets road-maintenance costs, whether the county could share jurisdiction with Wishek on the Giga project, and bonding requirements for wind-turbine decommissioning. One resident urged the county to consider banning wind towers entirely, saying, "Several states have done that, and there's a reason behind it."

Commission meeting draws largest crowd in decades

A number of residents remained after the zoning meeting to prepare for the next morning's county commission meeting. The McIntosh County Commission met April 8 in what Commissioner Neil Meidinger described as the largest turnout he has seen in more than 20 years, as residents filled the courtroom to weigh in on wind-energy development and zoning rules.

The meeting centered on public comment regarding Ørsted's proposed Elba project and the county's recently adopted three-mile setback for wind turbines, solar facilities and data centers. After more than an hour of testimony, the commission voted to enact a one-year moratorium on wind-energy development and later expanded it to mirror Logan County's moratorium, adding solar and data-center projects.

Speakers offered sharply differing views on the setback ordinance and Ørsted's request for a one-mile exception. Supporters of the Elba project—including Meril Piepkorn, Ruby Ackermann, Jeff Schauer, Richard Krine and Anna Meidinger—cited North Dakota's energy leadership, landowner rights, and the financial benefits. Philip Wanner, who lives near a turbine in Logan County, spoke against the project, saying it diminished the rural landscape and quality of life.

Okuwobi addressed Commissioners, reiterating that Ørsted cannot build the project under a three-mile setback. He said the company removed over 10 turbines from its layout to meet a one-mile buffer and redesigned the project. He said Ørsted was not asking the county to rewrite its ordinance, only to grant a specific exception.

Ninety percent of the Elba project's turbines are in McIntosh County, meaning the project could still proceed despite Logan County's moratorium. Commissioners also asked about conditional-use permits and if Ørsted could secure agreements from both participating and non-participating landowners. Okuwobi said the company is working on it.

Meier again presented a petition—this time with 386 signatures—urging the county to keep the three-mile setback adopted in January. He argued projected tax revenue does not account for increased road-maintenance costs and noted that only eight McIntosh County residents currently host turbines. He cited ongoing Public Service Commission reviews of noise, shadow flicker and debris at the Badger Wind project.

The two meetings underscored the deep community interest—and division—surrounding wind-energy development in McIntosh County. With a one-year moratorium now in place and Ørsted seeking a path forward for the Elba project, commissioners are expected to revisit the issue as new information, public-comment trends and state regulatory findings emerge in the months ahead.

The McIntosh County Star & Tribune reached out to Ørsted Energy with several questions.

The response received from Charlotte Bellotte, Head of Communications, was this, "We really valued partnering with McIntosh and Logan Counties on the Badger Wind project and on our second project, Elba Wind. We've spent a lot of time listening to the Commissioners, the Zoning Committee, and community members, and we respect how they see wind development fitting into the county's future. While we are considering next steps for the Elba project, we are grateful to be part of this community through Badger Wind and would like to see further economic development in the local area."

Heritage Society, road projects and other business

After the moratorium vote, Marvel Gross and Randy Woehl of the McIntosh County Heritage Society addressed the crowd, highlighting recent improvements to the museum grounds. Gross noted that the Ashley Lions and Ørsted Energy donated a combined $23,000 for new lighting scheduled for installation this month. Dickey Rural Network will provide free Wi-Fi service. The society requested liability-insurance coverage for its board and assistance with its monthly telephone bill. Commissioners took no action on the requests.

Road supervisor Chris Opstahl provided updates on several projects. Highway 9 slope repair, striping and box-culvert work are fully closed out. Bids for the Green Lake and Lake Hoskins road projects were scheduled to open the following day. The county submitted State Revolving Fund applications for gravel, base stabilization and testing. Dust control, estimated at $40,000 for one section, was removed from the request. Construction north of Highway 9 is expected in 2027.

A resident asked whether the county would supply culverts for private approaches. Opstahl said the county provides culverts and bands, while landowners handle installation.

Francis Krumm revisited concerns about rock removal from county and federal-aid roads. The State's Attorney reiterated that liability and bidding laws prevent farmers from performing road-reconstruction work.