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ANTRIM

## A vote in favor of wind energy

50 percent turnout biggest in town history

**By Jessica Camille Aguirre**

ANTRIM — Years of speculation over the town's disposition toward wind energy was silenced Tuesday after voters widely rejected two articles to regulate local wind development in a town election that brought out an unprecedented number of residents.

While officials balked at putting a decisive spin on the intended message of the vote, a loose consensus emerged around Antrim's overall support for the future of wind.

"The people have spoken," said Select Board member John Robertson, who is also ex officio to the Planning Board that drew up the ordinance. "This was a 'yes' to wind and a 'no' to the ordinance."

The issue, which has sparked rampant debate over the long-term merits and short-term viability of a large-scale industrial development that sets a course for renewable energy, brought 815 of 1,649 registered voters to the polls Tuesday. It was the highest turnout for a town election that Antrim has ever seen, according to the office of the Town Clerk. Thirty-five residents also came and registered for the first time in order to cast a ballot.

Sixty-one percent of voters rejected the ordinance designed to regulate the development of large-scale wind facilities, and 72 percent rejected an amendment that would have banned any wind development within the Rural Conservation District, a swathe of land that constitutes half the area of town.

The decision leaves the town without an effective set of rules to regulate industrial wind development, although currently the only proposed project is a 10-turbine facility slated for Tuttle Hill and Willard Mountain that is set to be regulated by the state Site Evaluation Committee, or SEC, due to the amount of energy expected to be produced.

Eolian Renewable Energy, and its subsidiary Antrim Wind LLC, led the charge against the ordinance, saying that it was too restrictive to allow for significant development. While the ordinance wouldn't have impacted the project directly, even if it had been passed, many considered the decision to be both a referendum on wind and a message that could weigh heavily on SEC deliberations.

John Soininen, Eolian co-founder who has become the public face of the proposed project in town, said he was not

surprised by the results of the vote. "We made an effort to clarify for people what the ordinance would mean," he said. "There were people who said that you could be pro-wind and pro-ordinance, and yeah, theoretically you could, but in terms of practical application, you could not be pro-wind and pro-ordinance. The two were mutually exclusive. We made that clear."

In the lead up to the vote, Soininen and Eolian made widespread and concerted efforts to communicate a sense that the proposed ordinance was too stifling. The position gained support from the Select Board shortly before the vote after board members voted to issue a press release urging for the ordinance's defeat.

Now, scrutiny on the path to turbine construction will likely re-focus on a contract that Eolian submitted to the Select Board for review last year. While Soininen said the company wouldn't delay its application to the SEC in order to draw up a contract, he indicated that Eolian hopes to get a friendlier reception from the executive governing board than it did from the town Planning Board.

"Our hope is that the message is now clear to the selectmen," he said. "People don't want an ordinance; they want a set of reasonable regulations that will ensure that the town has appropriate restrictions in place to control the development, use and ongoing maintenance of a wind farm."

Robertson, who was an outspoken critic of the ordinance, said the board would address the proposed contract in the coming months. Whether the board and the company will come to an agreement before SEC deliberations begin is unclear.

Still, the level of regulation considered appropriate lies at the heart of continued contention over the development.

"I believe that the project is going to be a lot of noise," voter Anna Bachilas said Tuesday as she was leaving the polls. She voted to support the ordinance. Her property is at the foot of Tuttle Hill, one of the ridges targeted for development, and she said she's concerned that the impact could change the comfort of life for abutters. "We're used to the quiet around here."

Amidst intense campaigning from wind developers and supporters, as well as from abutters and conservationists concerned with the fallout of noise and construction impacts, some worried that voters would not be able to make sense of the muddled message.

But the disparity between support for the ordinance and its amendment, as well as the raw number of voters who turned out, indicate that residents have followed the wind issue closely as the ordinance took shape. Carter Proctor, an Antrim resident for 70 years, said Tuesday that he weighed the issue back and forth many times before coming to his final decision. Ultimately, he said, his vote was based on what he considered to be an unfairly light tax burden on the developers. "I'm not against wind," he said. "I just think everyone should pay their fair share."

Formal tax arrangements will likely be set by contract negotiations between the Select Board and Eolian. Those negotiations, according to Robertson, will not be open to the public. But there will be a series of public hearings after the contract is drawn up to receive input from residents.

The draft contract, a 14-page proposal drawn up by Eolian and sent to the Ledger-Transcript by Soininen in September, would set turbine height at a 500-foot maximum and allow turbines to be placed at least three times the turbine height from an occupied building.

Those two issues set off a firestorm of debate among abutters during the ordinance drafting process, as many worried that their properties would be insufficiently protected from devaluation.

Planning Board member Martha Pinello, who said Tuesday that she joined the board in part to draw up an

ordinance that would impact the SEC deliberations, said the puzzle is to fit care for the common good with care for individuals in the community. She was concerned, she said, that the SEC operates under a mandate to ensure the shift to renewable energy within a certain time frame by paving the way for alternative energy production.

But that shift, she noted, would impact some residents more than others.

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