



News ▶

- ▶ Sports
- ▶ Editorial
- ▶ Classifieds
- ▶ Place Class Ad
- ▶ Calendar
- ▶ Obituaries
- ▶ Photo Gallery
- ▶ Weather
- ▶ Subscribe
- ▶ Contact
- ▶ Web Links
- ▶ Archives
- ▶ About Us

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News

New rules will regulate windmill farms

By Scott Nicholson
nicholson@wataugademocrat.com

Watauga County now has the state's first ordinance regulating wind energy systems, which could serve as a model for such ordinances in other counties. Planning director Joe Furman presented the ordinance with few changes, clarifying the definition of small wind energy systems on farms, adding the county attorney's legal opinion on how the state's ridge law applies to wind energy systems, and how the county's high-impact, land-use ordinance applies to the ordinance. Furman said large wind energy systems that were the sole use of the site would fall under the high-impact land-use ordinance.



The National Park Service also developed a set of maps identifying impacts from certain viewpoints along the Blue Ridge Parkway. The park service requested use of park maps as well as other planning maps in determining any impact on the parkway's viewshed.

The park service would have non-binding input on any permit whose wind turbine would be in the parkway's viewshed.

Furman also addressed how a wind research station would fall under the ordinance. He said it would be considered a "large" system under the ordinance and would also be regulated by the high-impact land-use ordinance.

Commissioner Keith Honeycutt said any research station should operate for a specific period and not be left open-ended.

Commissioner Winston Kinsey asked why the ordinance needed a distinction between turbines that generate power for either on-site or off-site consumption. "Since this is the first one in North Carolina, this is something we will need to come back and fine tune," commission chairman Jim Deal said.

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The ordinance allows smaller wind turbines, used for on-site electricity generation and consumption, to be approved by the planning department. Larger, commercial farms designed for off-site power generation undergo a review process by the county planning board.

The county commissioners approved allowing the Appalachian Skate Park Council to rent advertising signs at the county skate park. The ad signs, in the amount of \$400, \$500, or \$1,000 per year would be used to pay off loans for construction costs at the skate park.

The Watauga County Youth Advisory Council gave a presentation to the commissioners. The council allows young people to have input on community services for their age group. Kumar Dave, a board member, said the main focus of the group is on the development of a teen youth center. The council has agreed on a "town-square design," he said, which could include an arcade and dance area, hopefully with a gymnasium. Dave said such a center would keep youths from being bored and making bad decisions.

"We need this youth center, because there's no specific place for teens to hang out," he said. "I know teens who hang out in the Wal-Mart parking lot."

The commissioners told the group about plans for a teen center or YMCA at the proposed high school site in Perkinsville. Deal said the county needed to provide an alcohol- and tobacco-free site for youths. The council meetings are open to both adults and youth.

Tax administrator Kelvin Byrd settled tax collections for the past fiscal year as required by law. The office collected \$23 million of \$23.4 million in property taxes billed. The settlement also had separate accounting for each municipality and fire district, which are collected by the county tax office.

The commissioners authorized Byrd to collect taxes for the current fiscal year and voted to add a statement to the current year's tax bills to say .0341 cents on the county's property tax rate has been set aside for "School Capital Projects." The tax rate is .313 for each \$100 of valuation, and the amount designated for schools was adopted in the 2005-2006 budget for high school construction. The increase was carried over, though the amount, along with the overall property tax rate, was reduced to a revenue-neutral rate in the wake of a property revaluation.

Maintenance director Robert Marsh said a portion of the existing structure at the former county detention center could be used for the planned parking lot on Queen Street. Engineers are now developing a demolition plan that will preserve retaining walls, and the third phase will include veneer and landscaping as required by the town of Boone's Unified Development Ordinance. The county has also discussed trading the property for 35 parking spaces owned by the town, which is currently getting engineer's reports and cost estimates. Even if the swap took place, the county would be required to demolish the building, which could take two to three months. If the county develops the parking lot, it should be completed by August 2007 when the courthouse expansion is complete.

County manager Rocky Nelson said the original goal had been to get the lot paved by November, but by waiting until the spring, the town would have more time to consider a trade. Some town residents spoke at a planning hearing, seeking the property for use as a public park.

Honeycutt presented a resolution asking the state to pursue purchase of Chimney Rock as a state park. The property is currently listed for sale and, as a private park, has attracted a quarter of a million visitors a year. The Rutherford County commissioners have asked the state to acquire the property and add it to the

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Hickory Nut Gorge State Park. The commissioners adopted the resolution of support.

The commissioners unanimously adopted a policy prohibiting use of tobacco in county buildings, grounds, parking areas, walkways and vehicles. The county would also contribute up to \$200 per employee for those who want to undergo a smoking cessation program. The policy will take effect on Jan. 1.

The policy is designed to provide “a safe work environment for employees, volunteers, contractors and the public by prohibiting the use of tobacco products in any building or structure owned or leased by the county.” County employees are also eligible to participate in smoking cessation programs sponsored by the county’s health insurance provider.

“This is not a ‘you’re a good guy, you’re a bad guy’ type of situation,” Deal said.

“This will hopefully be a benefit for those people who want to get help.”

Mary Moretz, commissioner candidate, spoke during the public comment period in support of a homestead exemption act. She said encouraging an expansion of the state act would help some people to keep their homes as property values escalate.



Connie Goff is all smiles as she embarks on a 2,141-mile bicycle trek.

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474 Industrial Park Drive Boone, NC 28607 ~ Telephone 828-264-3612 ~ Fax 828-262-0282