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City Commission Candidates to Skip Primary

By Rosemary Horvath
Herald Correspondent

A pair of incumbents and six newcomers will compete for four 4-year terms on the Alma city commission. Two other candidates have sights on one partial term for two years.

Altogether however, their number isn't high enough to warrant a primary election in August, according to city clerk Sara Anderson. Instead, candidate names will appear on the ballot for the Nov. 8 general election. The five terms begin with the start of 2023.

Current city commissioners seeking another term for four years are Michelle Pitts and Roxann Harrington.

Danny Wernick, who in 2020 earned a two-year term with the fourth highest number of votes among commissioners, is seeking a four-year term.

Candidate newcomers joining this group are Laurie Harrison, Doug Haney, Ricky Gallop, William Gorton, and Gene G. Smith.

Candidates for one 2-year term are Andrew Bare and Randy Clark.

Absent from the roster are names of current officeholders Nick Piccolo and Audra Stahl.

Both tell The Herald their decisions to step away from political life has nothing to do with the backlash they received over supporting repurposing a Warwick drive facility into a short-term shelter for unaccompanied immigrant youth crossing the southern border.

See ALMA page 28



In a four-hour meeting last Thursday, the Fulton Township Board of Trustees voted unanimously to turn down a recommendation from its planning commission to move forward with the Heartland Wind Project.

Fulton Board Nixes Proposed Turbines

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

There are many wind turbines throughout Gratiot County. Last Thursday, however, the Fulton Township Board put the brakes on a proposal to put a dozen of them in their collective backyard.

Culminating a nearly four-hour meeting, the board voted unanimously (4-0) to turn down the previous recommendation from the township's planning commission to move forward with the Heartland Wind Project. Approximately 100 people filled the township hall, and another 20 people zoomed in, and all but a couple within the public comment spoke out against the project.

Denise Rossman, township supervisor, recused herself from the special meeting, noting a conflict of interest. That left the decision to Melissa Zemla,

treasurer, Chad Marecek, clerk, and trustees Robert Baxter and Michael Oberlitner.

Invenergy, a Chicago-based company, had proposed putting 12 wind turbines in Fulton Township as part of the project seeking approval for 84 sites to eventually place 72 turbines throughout Fulton, Washington, Newark, New Haven, North Shade, and North Star townships. All townships except Washington have held public meetings on the project.

The New Haven Township Planning Commission approved 27 turbines in mid-February. In mid-March, the Gratiot County Planning Commission approved 29 wind turbines in Newark and North Star townships. A week later, North Shade commissioners also unanimously approved their township for seven turbines.

See FULTON page 5

Former NFL Lineman Finds Home, Mentoring Role in St. Louis



Keno Hills in the weight room at St. Louis High School. The former NFL lineman landed in a mentoring role as an assistant football coach and hall monitor over this past year.

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

The 6:30 a.m. weightlifting workouts are optional for eighth graders in St. Louis looking to turn themselves into predatory Sharks on the football field over the next few years. Yet what began as a few bleary-eyed students now seems more like a feeding frenzy of young athletes trying to get stronger. Credit for that morning motivation goes to Keno Hills, the man leading those workouts.

Standing 6 feet, seven inches, Hills, who put that size and athletic ability to work for the Saints, Bears, and Dolphins during a five-year career in the National Football League in the late 1990s, is somewhat of a towering mentor. Yet young athletes and students alike seem drawn to the hall monitor and assistant

football coach.

St. Louis is likely the last place the Tampa native would have envisioned for his home. "I've had my ups and downs in life," said Hills, 48 years old.

After a Florida pastor recommended he go to Mid-Michigan Adult and Teen Challenge in Saginaw, Hills met Pastor Ryan Tice, from Parkside Assembly of God in St. Louis. That particular relationship turned into a true friendship as Hills said he ended up staying with Tice and his wife for months.

Joy March, an administrative assistant at the high school, first wondered about Hills helping with the Shark football team. Last fall, he stepped on the sidelines alongside Julian Paski, the head coach. Hills accepted the hall monitor position early in 2022.

See ST. LOUIS page 7

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GRASSROOTS: Meet the Fulton Family Who Organized Effort to Reject Turbines

**By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer**

On a late April Saturday afternoon, three members of the Defever family shoot the breeze on their Fulton Township farm. After a long winter, summer seemingly arrives in a rush without the gradual windup of spring. As winds whip through their slightly rolling land, perhaps ruffling some feathers on their chickens, a handful of turbines tumble in endless circles on the northeast horizon. Their family's efforts, in coordination with many neighbors, may have just kept those turbines from coming any closer.

Harold and Kathy Defever were just getting their family started when they found their farm nearly 40 years ago. They came, in part, for the quiet tranquility that the land afforded them. But years later, when push came to shove, they effectively placed a check on Invenergy, the Chicago-based company intent on installing more wind turbines nearby.

Both Defever daughters, by coincidence more than purpose, ended up living in California. Kathleen, 44 years old, works as an insurance lawyer just outside San Francisco. She was also appointed to the Planning Commission in Tiburon in 2018. Sister Carrie, 40 years old, who lives farther down-state in Ridgecrest, has a civilian job in IT development for the U.S. Navy. Both women, who frequently return home, hope to inherit the farm someday.

Harold had been approached about a wind turbine on their property around 2013, and though they never signed up for it, the whole project seemingly fell through. Late last summer he noticed a car that made a beeline straight into his neighbor's high cornfield. That turned out to be someone from the wind company "trying to set up a soil sample," he said.

By fall 2021, with news of the sixth and final wind farm in Gratiot County, Harold and Kathy met

with Invenergy officials to express their displeasure of the prospect of a wind turbine just outside their front door in another neighbor's field. They made enough noise to get that particular turbine "red-flagged" and eventually recommended for a location even closer to his neighbor with the corn and some horses. "I decided I didn't want to do that to my neighbor," said Harold, realizing the enormity of the fight ahead.

After three meetings with Invenergy reps at their makeshift office in Ithaca, Harold wondered aloud about the possibility of bringing his lawyer daughter into the discussion. At first, Kathleen wasn't sure what sort of appetite other residents of Fulton would have for it. After all, there are wind turbines all over Gratiot County. Maybe everyone's onboard with them.

"Neighbors" can be pretty widespread in a rural community. As the Defever family reached out to them near, and a little farther, they learned that many people were not happy about turbines that might financially benefit 12 families in a township with 2,400 people. "If nobody wants them, maybe we should take a stand," Kathleen said.

From there, the real work began. Over the course of four months, the insurance lawyer, who knew much about the work of planning committees, developed expertise in wind conflicts. Kathleen consulted a Michigan attorney and brought a community planner and an acoustic engineer to the public meetings.

They weren't sure how much of the public would turn out to the open forums in late January, March, and April, but folks filled the township hall, around 100 for each marathon meeting. Kathleen described it as "democracy at work," increasingly encouraged by the momentum they gained through winter and early spring.

Some folks didn't even realize they could have a say in the pro-



The Defever family, which includes (left to right) Kathy, Kathleen, and Harold, led efforts to keep wind turbines out of their neighborhood. Last Thursday, the Fulton Township Board rejected a proposed plan for 12 of them as part of the Heartland Farms Wind Project.

cess. "You could see people's eyes light up as they learned they could stand up for their rights," Kathleen said.

On a March 24 meeting that lasted nearly two NCAA Tournament basketball games, which included a Michigan loss, the Fulton Planning Commission approved the "special land use" for 12 turbines. Undaunted, the Defever family and a slew of neighbors vowed to fight on.

Carrie Defever built a website that addressed much of the controversies around turbines, including noise, health, environmental disruptions, and much more. As the April meeting drew near, they made 200 "no wind" signs. By this past Saturday, they had distributed all but 30, as many traveled their dirt road to pick up a sign. The quiet house had never seen that much traffic.

Kathleen felt confident on the evening of April 20, as the Fulton Board faced a tough decision. She

noted courts, all over the world, weighing in on the subject. "The courts are the neutral arbitrators of this discussion," she said. "They're saying there is evidence of turbines damaging people's health."

By nearly 11 p.m. at last Thursday's meeting, the crowd still edged forward in their black plastic chairs. There was some confusion with a motion to advance the planning commission's previous decision, which had to be withdrawn.

That procedural snafu, however, seemed to land with a thud. "It scared the living daylights out of us," Kathy Defever said.

In the end, the board unanimously ruled to reject the placement of a dozen turbines in Fulton. What comes next for the entire Heartland Wind Farm project? Who knows? For now it seems these residents are out of the woods, with their woods and lands uninterrupted. "I think it's a done deal from a procedural standpoint," Kathleen said. "And I don't think

they have anything valid to sue over."

For the Defever clan, as well as many of those neighbors they've become better acquainted with, the time for the "no" was now, rather than bracing for lawsuits down the road. The nondisclosure agreements, the small payoff for a bigger disruption, and the potential hazards did not sit well with most who raised their voices against them.

Still, they would like to see improvements to the whole process, including the "noticing requirements" that initially only contacted anyone within 300 feet of another property with a proposed turbine.

"The list of people required to be notified was 123 households out of 2,400 people," Kathleen said.

Though one household, and a family of four, seems to have successfully pushed back by helping deny any space for the Heartland Farms Wind Project so close to their homes.

FULTON *continued from page 1*

Since late January, Fulton Township residents have become more accustomed to a public forum, filling the township hall in three consecutive meetings on what would be the sixth and final windfarm in Gratiot County. Led largely by the efforts of the Defever family, the evening of April 20 was no different as lawyers and experts kicked off the meeting by running through the details of the project.

Things typically get interesting as the public is invited to make comments, in three-minute increments, on the matter at hand. Kathleen Defever began by encouraging the Fulton Board to carefully consider the community's wishes and listen to the testimony of two experts who would speak later in the evening. She also directly addressed the assertion from an Invenergy attorney who said they "must approve" the proposal because it met the zoning requirements.

"They have applied for permission to do business within our township," Defever said. "It is absurd for Invenergy to suggest that the board 'must approve' any application that merely meets the minimum requirements for an application to be considered."

The gathered crowd was overwhelmingly against wind turbines in the township, and Oberlitner reported having received some 50 letters, 45 of which opposed the project and only five that supported it. One young man, described as "fresh out of college," said he had



Approximately 100 people filled the township hall, and another 20 people zoomed in, and all but a couple within the public comment spoke out against the project.

"been a little embarrassed by us, and how not one person speaking against the windmills has actually spoken about our neighbors and how the windmills are in their best interests."

Still, he suggested that those who want wind turbines on their property should have them closer

to their homes than property lines, making them less intrusive upon their neighbors. He also suggested tabling the motion until some of those details could be worked out.

One other woman spoke up in favor of the project. "We signed up for this project in 2016, and it had been in the works for a long time,"

she said. "Now here we are arguing about putting them up."

Though every other public speaker pointed out a variety of drawbacks, including, but not limited to, adverse effects on wildlife and hunting, diminishing real estate values, noise and light pollution, and harms to health. One

lifelong resident, "speaking from the heart," urged the board to preserve the purity of the countryside. "We've been used up enough," she said referencing all the wind turbines in the county. "We need to be left alone."

In the end, as the hour neared 11 p.m., the board members were faced with motions and decisions. They had reviewed the large white binders before them with all the technical details, listened to the dueling experts on each side of the issue, and heard everyone out with an opinion on the subject. One trustee even reported losing a bit of sleep over all of it.

Their vote denying the project, certainly hoped for by most of the residents in the hall, was no guarantee. The resulting applause from the audience, perhaps a mixture of joy and relief, certainly throws a wrench into the Invenergy project.

Representatives from Invenergy did not respond to multiple requests for comment by Herald presstime late Tuesday afternoon.

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