

Sound, Fury, and Indifference: *The Lessons of Big Wind in Gratiot County*

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

By the end of this calendar year, the Heartland Wind Farm should be up and running in Gratiot County. As the sixth and final installment of wind energy projects around these parts, some 70-plus turbines rising 500 feet in the air through five townships will not have come without some serious heartaches, as well as townhall and courtroom debates. Yet they will spin, generating lots of clean power.

Jim Wheeler, president of Greater Gratiot Development, reported that the components are being delivered to the different sites throughout Newark, New Haven, North Shade, North Star and Washington townships. Though everything is "pretty much weather-dependent right now," given the long, frozen winters and wet springs of Michigan, Wheeler thinks all should be up and spinning by December 2023.

Love or hate them, the wind turbines have proved to be something of a moneymaker for the county, leasing landowners, and, of course, the large developing companies like Invenergy who have been pitching them for over a decade now.

While townships like Seville and Fulton have kept the large turbines at bay and it seems to be an ongoing debate in neighboring Montcalm County, the wind revolution is not likely to end soon. Even as the space for them seems to be tapped out in Gratiot County.

Metal-on-metal racket

If Marc Raycraft knew now what he didn't know then, he might not have signed up for a wind turbine as part of the Pine River wind park in 2019. He was on board with the cause, well aware of the need for clean energy. The big spinner on his 160 acres on the north side of the county gets him \$5,500 a year in the lease. With payouts based on energy production, he might draw another healthy check.

The problem arose with the "croaking" sound — a metal-on-metal screech that Raycraft likens to a dinosaur's mating call. It's not something that happens in high winds, but rather on some of the least blustery days, where the gigantic blades somehow decide to turn into themselves.

"I've measured it at 78 decibels at my house and that's 1,200 feet from the turbine," said Raycraft, noting that's well above the acceptable average.

To make matters more complicated, Raycraft had been on the Gratiot County Planning Commission for about a decade, even chairing it for a time. His background in construction, where he said he had employed some of the largest crews in the county, served him well

on that panel.

Of course, he knew about the noisemaker on his own property, as do his neighbors downwind from it. About once a month the croaking starts up, and not something that goes on for hours and hours. But neither do most barking dogs. Over time, he said he learned about more people who had complained about noises and other issues from the turbines.

The problem was, he said, that even as a member of the planning commission, he did not have access to those other complaints. "The complaints were there," Raycraft said. "The Planning Commission was kept in the dark even though we are the ones responsible for making the laws."

As the proposal for the Heartland project made its way through the townships, even with the hiccup in Fulton, Raycraft had to weigh in on Newark and North Star, which are both "county zoned." In March, he would be the lone abstaining vote from the near-unanimous nod for approval.

"If we're going to keep doing windfarms in Gratiot County, we need to protect our landlords," Raycraft said at the time. "These things are getting bigger, and we need to increase the distances from the houses because it sounds like a jet. It doesn't sound like a refrigerator. That ship has sailed."

More permanent solution

The problem of the giant steel dinosaur in Raycraft's backyard has not fallen on deaf ears. DTE's Dennis Salas, the operations manager for the Gratiot Renewable Energy Center, has both acknowledged the noise and has tried to fix it.

Salas said he tries to help people directly, or "redirect their concerns to the correct person" as needed. In Raycraft's Pine River case he has done some of both — from new bearings and degreasers on the blades to calling in the GE engineers.

Some problems are a matter of deduction. "We're trying to engineer out any possible problem to get that turbine down to where there are no odd noises, regardless of the wind conditions," Salas said.

In some of the worst-case scenarios, whether the complaints be from a landowner with a turbine or a nearby neighbor, Salas said he does his "best to see things from their perspective," which includes conducting special noise studies from their home to the turbine.

"In the end, if we are abiding by the agreed upon ordinances, then that's pretty much the best we need to do," Salas said. "That's not to say I'm not going to stop my efforts to do my



Marc Raycraft, now a former member of the Gratiot County Planning Commission, continues to heed warnings about wind turbines. "If we're going to keep doing windfarms in Gratiot County, we need to protect our landlords," Raycraft said at a planning commission meeting in March. "These things are getting bigger, and we need to increase the distances from the houses because it sounds like a jet. It doesn't sound like a refrigerator. That ship has sailed."

best to make everyone comfortable."

Though there lies the rub, perhaps as loud as any prehistoric creature's groan in this whole debate. Raycraft maintains that county officials were violating their own ordinances by relying on sound averages rather than maximum sound levels. It was a point of contention brought up many times in the Fulton Township proceedings.

Supersized spinners

Raycraft resigned from the County Planning Commission on June 8, 2022. In addition to his allegations of violations of county ordinances and commission bylaws, he said the commission showed "favoritism to the applicant" and chose "the Heartland project over the health of Gratiot County residents."

Not too long before that resignation, Raycraft sat in a Gratiot County courtroom at a "defendant's table" and across from a jury box full of representatives from Invenergy, sound experts, engineers, and lots of lawyers. Though he was not "on trial" himself, the atmosphere made him feel like he was. He had hoped to make his case that the commission was failing the people they are supposed to serve, as well as what seemed like new problems associated with the larger blades on newer turbines.

"The actual towers are not any taller," Wheeler said. "They are actually shorter, as the blade cannot go above 499 feet. But the blades are bigger."

Of course, these newer ones produce more power. "The original ones in Breckenridge were 1.6 megawatts," Wheeler said, "and the rest are 2.3 or 2.5 megawatts."

For Raycraft, who admits that he doesn't mind seeing them, the turbines are simply too big and too close to homes. "Breckenridge is doing just fine," he said. "We need to increase the distances from the houses or size them back down."

But no one else with any complaints showed up at the courthouse that day. Raycraft had talked to some elderly folks who had heart problems but did not turn out. Another couple, selling a 100-year-old farmhouse at a loss, may have given up the fight. "I felt a bit like Nathan Hale on the stand," he said.

Though he would not suffer the same fate as the American soldier and spy who was captured and hanged by the British during the Revolutionary War. He simply resigned from the commission but remains steadfast in his warnings. "We need clean energy and lots of it," Raycraft said. "But we have to make it so people can live in their house with it."

MLK Day Events Scheduled at Alma College

Alma College will remember the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with a slate of events over the week of Jan. 16 celebrating and reflecting on his visions for civil rights and social justice, including a community engagement fair, poetry night, poverty simulation, art exhibit and more.

The week's activities are highlighted by a brunch for the campus and local community, with a keynote speech from Travis Hall, a Saginaw native and ordained bishop from Life Church International, on Monday, Jan. 16, from 10 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. (doors open at 9:30 a.m.) at the Art Smith Arena, Hogan Center, on campus at Alma College.

On that day, classes are canceled and athletics practices will not take place during scheduled events.

"We are looking forward to Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the week of events that follow on campus," said Jonathan Glenn, director of diversity and inclusion at Alma College. "We believe these events and the discussions that come from them have a significant impact on our students, who are then able to take the lessons they learned here and better their communities — both here, locally, as well as wherever life takes them."

Hall has served in ministry since 2001. In 2016, he launched cultivatemypurpose.com, with the mission of "helping people discover and cultivate their God-given purpose." In addition to the brunch, a number of other events are slated to take place for students, staff and faculty of Alma College:

Community Engagement Fair

Attendees have the opportunity to learn about various ways to help their local area, from noon to 1:15 p.m., Monday, Jan. 16 in the Hogan Center lobby.

Blood Drive

Alma College is sponsoring a Red Cross Blood Drive from 11 a.m. until 4:45 p.m., Monday, Jan. 16 in the Stone Recreation Center. Appointments are preferred, but walk-ins are welcome. Make an appointment at redcrossblood.org.

MLK Program Series

Various staff and faculty members will host a series of programs from 12:30 to 4 p.m., Monday, Jan. 16 across campus. "Poverty Simulation" is scheduled to take place in Hogan Center, Cappaert Gymnasium, while "Illustrating the Dream" will be held at Swanston Academic Center 110. "Gen-

der-Affirming Closet" will take place at Tyler-Van Dusen Campus Center, as will the "MLK Gallery Walk."

Hilson Poetry Slam

The public is invited as poets of all skill and experience levels perform works centered on King's legacies, including activism, resistance, oppression, liberation, revolution and justice. There will be an open mic session for anyone who wishes to perform; memorization is not required. The Hilson Poetry Slam is dedicated to the late Calvin Hilson '06, who started the tradition of hosting a poetry slam on Martin Luther King Jr. Day at Alma College, and tragically passed away in 2016. The slam will take place from 6 to 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, Jan. 18 in the lobby of Gelston Hall. RSVP is not required.

2023 Unity Celebration

Slated for 6 to 8 p.m., Friday, Jan. 20 at Tyler-Van Dusen Campus Center, this is the conclusion of the week's events. There, participants will celebrate the achievements of the past week, while enjoying live entertainment, dinner and community. The public is invited to attend; RSVP is not required.

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