

Citizens see fruits of labor in wind rules

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Editorial

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Call it a victory for the ordinary citizen, although the effort was certainly extraordinary.

The new rules for wind turbine development in Umatilla County are the result of a groundswell of citizen involvement.

The rules establish significant setbacks from rural homes and essentially keep the turbines out of the Walla Walla River watershed. The protected area covers more than 250 square miles.

Instead of corporate muscle and well-financed lobbying prevailing, the passion and persistence of Umatilla County residents yielded a well-earned victory that will serve us well now and into the future.

The victory means the view of the sacred Blue Mountains, as well as its invaluable resources including land, water and wildlife, are protected. The county and its citizens have sent a strong message about wind development.

This newspaper already has thanked the Umatilla County commissioners Larry Givens, Dennis Doherty and Bill Hansell for standing up for people and place. It's an example of elected officials doing what's best for a region instead of letting greed and money dominate a decision.

The real recognition belongs to the Blue Mountain Alliance, the Confederated Tribes of the Indian Reservation and hundreds of ordinary citizens.

Richard Jolly and Ryan Stoner stepped up two years ago and voiced opposition to the initial proposals that would have allowed significant development by the gigantic turbines. They helped form the Blue Mountain Alliance. They were joined by others — including Debbie Kelley, Ed Chesnut, Norm Kralman, Dale McKain, Jim Burns — to name just a handful of the key players.

Landowner Cindy Severe got involved, too. She spearheaded a petition drive for stronger setback rules. As a result, nearly 3,400 people made it clear that they wanted a two-mile setback for rural homes.

Our citizens faced formidable odds. Unlimited wind development might have provided short-term financial benefits during tough economic times. The wind companies had big-time attorneys on their side, along with the highly sought (albeit arguable) “green” energy label.

The tribes, who are known for looking ahead seven generations while honoring their culture and past, stepped forward, too. Leo Stewart and Kat Brigham, both respected members of the board of trustees, spoke in favor of the more restrictive rules.

Brigham’s wise words were especially effective:

“When we look at wind power we look at this ... saying, ... this is good, clean energy. But the concerns are unknown. The impacts are unknown. ... We don’t know everything. ... therefore it’s really important that we take a clear, careful approach.”

Ron Brown, a forward-thinking orchardist and businessman from Milton-Freewater, publicly told of his concerns for protecting the Walla Walla River and the watershed.

The effort by the citizens was civil. The message was clear and powerful. The result was the best example of participatory government at its finest.