

Wind farm proposal in western Sangamon picks up steam

Developer praises response for planned Sangamon County site



(Photo: Dusk falls over the Rail Splitter Wind Farm. SJ-R file)

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NEW BERLIN — Developers of a proposed commercial wind farm in western Sangamon County say they're continuing to sign up landowners and complete necessary studies in hopes of starting construction in 2012.

"We're all very happy right now with the way things have been progressing," said Chris Nickell, vice president of site establishment for American Wind Energy Management Corp. "We've really had a very good response from people who live in that area. That part of the project is going very smoothly."

"Well over 100" landowners have been signed up for the project along with almost 27,000 acres, Nickell said. About 20,000 of that acreage lies in what could be the first phase of the project.

The wind farm, which would be the county's first, is a joint development between American Wind Energy, which has a Springfield office but is a subsidiary of German-based Euro Wind Energy Management and Oak Creek Energy Systems Inc. of California.

The Sangamon Wind Farm would be built in phases within an area bounded by the Morgan County line to the west, Illinois 125 to the north and Illinois 104 to the south. The eastern boundary would start in the north near Farmingdale Road and continue south along an approximate extension of that road to Illinois 104.

The initial phase would be roughly 25,000 acres and could have 200 wind turbines.

“The Sangamon project as a whole, we expect to be around 500 megawatts,” Nickell said. “It may take two or three phases to get up to the approximate 500 megawatts. ... It’s important to remember we’re not going to build it all at once.”

Three-year options

The project also is split into two geographic areas — Sangamon 1, which includes the area from Pleasant Plains to Loami, and Sangamon 2, which is south of Loami.

Each area could take multiple phases to complete, he said,

“When you build something like this, you look for contiguous land, so the areas in which we have the most land signed up will most likely be the first phase. The turbines need to be connected to each other and then the electrical grid,” Nickell said.

“As of right now, we have a pretty good concentration of land between Pleasant Plains and Berlin, so it’s probable at this stage that this would be one of our first phases, but we won’t build that until we’ve talked to all the landowners and know who wants to be part of project.”

American Wind Energy is having landowners sign options to lease that are good for three years and renewable for another three, Nickell said.

Landowners would be moved onto the lease before construction starts. They are paid for the number acres they have enrolled in the project and would receive additional payments for hosting a wind turbine on their property or if they have a road or utility cables buried on their property.

Nickell declined to specify the payment amounts but said 70 percent of what his company pays landowners is acreage fees.

“Everyone inside the project area has the ability to participate,” he said. “Let’s say you own 20 acres and your neighbor owns 2,000 acres. Some wind developers will only talk to the guy with 2,000 acres and pay him for each turbine on his land. Our system will sign you both up, and you each get a payment per acre.”

He said the company would need 125 to 150 acres per turbine location.

County OK needed

Nickell said he expects to have all of the necessary landowners signed up by the end of this year or early next.

“We’ll spend 2011 getting all the permits and contracts in place, so in 2012 we’ll be able to break ground. That’s the general timeline,” he said.

The company has done environmental studies of the area, including bird and bat counts, and has been collecting wind data for the project area for more than a year and a half.

“We have meteorological towers in two locations, collecting wind speed and direction data,” Nickell said.

“To build a successful wind farm, you need three things. You need wind, willing landowners and you need access to the electrical grid. If you don’t have those three things, it’s dead in the water.”

The company is working with the Midwest Independent Transmission System Operator (MISO), which manages the electrical grid in the Midwest, to determine what kind and how many turbines are needed.

“When we get a final word from MISO of how big they want a first phase, at that point we’ll go back and calculate, and if they say we can have 200 megawatts, using 125 to 150 acres per turbine, we need this many acres as contiguous as possible,” he said.

The approval for wind farms in Illinois is done at the county level, and American Wind Energy does not expect to request the Sangamon County Board’s OK until next year.

Setback changes?

The board also could consider a petition from a group of residents who want the current setback requirement from the wind farm to the property of non-participating landowners to be increased from 1,200 feet to a half a mile.

County board member Tim Moore, District 22, chairman of the public health, safety and zoning committee, said there are no immediate plans to take up the setback request.

“We’re looking at several changes to our code, and we want to do it all at once, versus just doing something for one particular item,” he said.

Nickell said Sangamon County’s setback requirement is double the industry standard across the country.

“It’s very difficult to build the project as it is (with the county’s current setback requirements). If they increase that, we would go elsewhere for sure. It would not be a viable project,” Nickell said.

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Sangamon County's rules

Sangamon County passed zoning rules specifically regulating wind farms in 2006, but no applications have been filed yet for large-scale wind farms.

The rules define wind systems as:

- * Mini wind systems: Tower height maximum of 35 feet; setback of 1.1 times the tower height from property lines, principal structure and electric or utility lines.
- * Small wind systems: Tower heights of 35-80 feet; also a setback of 1.1 times the tower height from property lines, principal structure and electric or utility lines.
- * Commercial wind energy systems: Any project of 40 acres or more that requires a conditional use permit in an area zoned for agriculture. Tower height must comply with Federal Aviation Administration, and any other state or federal rules. Cannot be within 1 1/2 miles of incorporated areas of 10,000 or more population, or within a half-mile of incorporated areas of less than 10,000 population. The tower must be at least 1,200 feet from the perimeter of the site, though exceptions can be allowed, and at least 1,000 feet or three times the rotor diameter, whichever is greater, from "principal structures" in unincorporated areas.

Wind farm at a glance

- * Boundaries are the Morgan County line to the west, Illinois 125 to the north and Illinois 104 to the south. The eastern boundary would start in the north near Farmingdale Road and continue south along an approximate extension of that road to Illinois 104.
- * The initial phase will consist of roughly 25,000 acres and about 200 wind turbines.
- * The project as a whole is projected to generate about 500 megawatts of electricity.

New Berlin worries wind farm would hurt growth

NEW BERLIN — The proposed Sangamon Wind Farm would border New Berlin on three sides, leaving village officials worried it could hinder the community's growth.

"I'm not opposed to alternate types of energy and neither is the board, but our biggest concern was the distance they have to come from our incorporated limits," Village President Steve Frank said.

County ordinance requires that a commercial wind energy system cannot be within 1 1/2 miles of incorporated areas of 10,000 or more population or within a half-mile of incorporated areas of less than 10,000 population.

“Our concern is ... we’d only have a half a mile that we could annex out without being too close to them,” Frank said.

Representatives of American Wind Energy Management Corp., which is behind the wind farm project, came to a village board meeting last month to go over the project.

Chris Nickell, vice president of site establishment, said he explained to the board that his company also believes a half-mile is too close to small communities such as New Berlin. Therefore, the company’s policy is to keep a mile distance regardless of population.

He said company representatives also sought information from the village on their plans for future development or any areas they want to incorporate in the future.

“There’s plenty of room out there, and we have no reason or desire to encroach on any of these small towns. We want to work with these small towns. If we know what their forward planning is, we’ll plan accordingly,” Nickell said.

As the project area is set up, New Berlin could be surrounded by the wind farm everywhere but to the north. Frank said most of the village’s expansion has occurred on its west side.

Nickell said a 4 ½-mile box has been cut out of the wind farm project area to accommodate New Berlin and Berlin.

He also noted that the wind farm project will create construction jobs, possibly for years depending on how the project’s phases take shape.

And Nickell pointed to a statistic from the American Wind Energy Association that shows every 100 wind turbines require a maintenance staff of 15 people.

“The major impact to these rural areas is with regard to the tax base,” he said, citing Illinois law that each megawatt of a wind turbine has a \$360,000 taxable value

“A 2-megawatt wind turbine would have a value of \$720,000 ... so each one of these turbines get taxes as if it was a \$720,000 house,” which is particularly a big boon for school districts, he said.

Frank said the village hopes to work more with American Wind Energy Management to discuss an acceptable “buffer zone” for New Berlin.

“They’ve been real cooperative as far as wanting to help get this so that everything goes smoothly,” he said.

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