

Let's not blow our chance at wind power

January 13, 2008, Steve White

West Virginia is on the verge of solidifying its position as a world energy leader, if we don't blow it. Known for its production of coal, oil and gas, West Virginia is now poised to further diversify by becoming one of the national leaders in the wind power industry.

West Virginia is blessed with many natural resources, one of which is having viable locations for the capture of wind power. As we all know, there is an intense and growing debate about global warming and a thirst for renewable sources of energy. In fact, an increasing number of states now require utilities to purchase a portion of power from renewable sources.

This situation represents a tremendous opportunity for our state. However, the immediate fate of wind projects now lies with our Supreme Court. They must decide whether to uphold the permit issued by our Public Service Commission to the Beech Ridge project in Greenbrier County.

I hope the court upholds the permit, and here is why.

The Beech Ridge project has gone through a very rigorous and lengthy application and hearing process in order to get approval from the PSC.

Last year, the PSC completed more than a yearlong review of the proposed Beech Ridge wind project, a review that was noteworthy because of its thoroughness and complexity, as well as for the eleven significant conditions the PSC placed on the project before construction could begin.

The PSC did its duty for the citizens of our state by responsibly analyzing all elements of this relatively new energy industry. They incorporated safeguards to protect the public interest while also allowing the wind industry to develop under a set of defined and predictable standards. Full participation was available to all individuals and groups who had concerns regarding the project.

PSC approval allows a \$300 million investment in West Virginia that will create hundreds of jobs in the skilled labor sector, including local construction workers, as well as good-paying permanent jobs with benefits. In addition, the wind industry will be creating an entirely new tax source for our state and the counties where projects are located.

Gov. Manchin and the West Virginia Legislature have also done their parts in creating a stable environment for the development of wind energy. Recent legislation dramatically modernized and increased tax liabilities of the wind power industry. This action on taxes, combined with the PSC's strict new standards on wind development, and the positive and significant economic impact of a \$300 million investment has set the stage for a bright and positive future for a new energy industry.

Fortunately for our state, the Beech Ridge project has united many business, labor, governmental, environmental and conservation groups in a partnership for the future and has set a positive tone for pursuing a shared vision of what West Virginia can be.

It is essential the Supreme Court recognize the complex decisions made by the PSC were done in the most thoughtful and comprehensive manner possible. Let's not miss our state's opportunity to become part of the renewable energy solution.

White is director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation.