

Planners face key choices for wind farm

■ **The Plum Creek Wind Farm could generate \$18 to \$36 million in local tax revenue over 20 years of operation.**

It could be more than a year before the first new wind towers appear in rural Westbrook, but crucial decisions are underway right now.

When the project is finished, Plum Creek Wind Farm will easily overshadow Odell Wind Farm, in terms of economic impact on the county. Like the Odell project, this one is led by Geronimo Energy, a company owned by Mt. Lake native Noel Rahn.

The Geronimo Energy staff has been meeting with Westbrook area land owners to discuss the project's long-range future. The early estimate is that construction will get underway sometime in 2019.

"We are looking at between 100 and 200 turbines," said Lindsay Smith, director of marketing and communications for Geronimo Energy. "We are looking to see a project of up to 400 megawatts, although the total size is still up in the air."

If the project reaches the 400 megawatt level, it would be double the size of the Odell project, which is 200

megawatts. Plus, it appears about two-thirds of the Plum Creek Wind Farm towers would be built in Cottonwood County, vs. about half of the towers for the Odell Wind farm.

Decisions regarding the size of the project are expected to be made within the next six months to a year, according to Smith.

"The number of turbines will ultimately come down to the project size and which turbines we select," Smith said. "This is early in the development stage. We are still out there, working on land (for the project)."

In addition to property considerations, the size of this endeavor is based on other factors, such as permitting, access to transmission and consideration as to who might acquire the power.

There have been a few meetings with the public and Geronimo officials have been upbeat about how those have gone.

"There is good local support," Smith said. "So far, the people in the local community have been very receptive."

Economic impact

Smith said the economic impact on the Westbrook area and county as a whole will be significant.

"It comes down to the size of the project," Smith said. "The potential local tax revenue, based on similar projects could be \$18 million to \$36 million over 20 years, during operation."

The Geronimo Energy projects generally come with a community fund, which is a charitable donation to

local communities. Smith said the Plum Creek Wind Farm would provide \$40,000 per year over 20 years for the community fund if it is a 200 megawatt project. If it hits 400 megawatts, the fund would double in size.

When total landowner payments, local spending and charitable contributions are all considered, the combined total could reach \$100 million over 20 years.

In addition, there should be an immediate economic impact when construction gets underway.

"If the size hits 400 megawatts, we are probably looking at 250 to 300 construction workers," Smith said. "It would probably be between a one- and two-year build-out, depending on the size."

Depending on the final project size, it could cover the following townships:

- In Cottonwood County—Ann, Highwater and Westbrook townships.
- In Murray County—Dovray and Holly townships.
- In Redwood County—Lamberton and North Hero townships.

Looking ahead

Smith believes the future is bright for the entire Plum Creek Wind Farm. She is upbeat about the potential of this project, as well as the involvement of the region.

"We try to involve the community throughout the project and we try to involve the farmers," Smith said. "It is important for us to be active in the community."

"Being farmer friendly is at the core of our mission."