

Looking into the 'noise' about wind turbines

By Ashley Box

TUSTIN - When the state of Michigan commissioned recommendations to help formulate wind energy policies, acoustic expert Rick James saw two problems with the commission. The commission lacked both the expertise of an acoustic engineer and a medical doctor.

Without these two perspectives, a major concern of wind turbines - their potential physical side effects due to the sounds they emitted - were overlooked.

To counter this oversight, James has been working since 2006, consulting and sharing current research results that shed more light on this issue.

Thursday, James travelled to northern Michigan, meeting with Sherman Township residents at the behest of the local Save Our Sherman group.

"The state set the setback at 1,000 feet, looking at it from an economic perspective," James said. "If they looked at it from a public health perspective, the setbacks would be at least a mile."

James highlighted two primary concerns with the health effects of wind turbines. The first is the simple audible annoyance that he cited as causing sleep disturbance, among other conditions.

While wind turbines produce a relatively quiet sound when compared to other common noises such as cars, airports, or railroads, a study in Sweden showed that people find the sound more annoying.

"It causes the problem with sleep disturbance not because it's overly loud, but because it can be equated to Chinese water torture. It's the constant, drop, drop, drop."

"One factor we didn't understand is that people choose to live in rural communities to get away from the noise," James explained. "What they are looking for is something only rural America can offer - peace and quiet."

The second health concern related to wind turbines is connected to the inaudible, low-frequency sound produced. While this concern has been rejected by wind companies, James himself has done research that proves that windmills produce a constant low-frequency sound.

"I found it dominant, omnipresent. Unlike the audible whooshing, which is there only part of the time when the wind is just right, the low frequency is there all of the time," James said.

Low-frequency sounds, which are created by large and stable sound waves, are known to travel for great distances and penetrate nearly every substance.

However, the medical dangers of the low-frequency sound waves are still highly debated and not yet conclusive.

One study that James cites comes from New York. After encountering several patients living near wind farms who complained of symptoms ranging from migraines and dizziness to uneasiness, Dr. Nina Pierpont began one of the first peer-reviewed comprehensive medical studies of the effects of low-frequency sound emitted by wind turbines.

According to James, the study asked patients with symptoms to physically move away from the wind turbine area - and the symptoms disappeared. She then had them move back, and the symptoms returned. The process was repeated, and she collected the data. The results of her study may be

viewed for free at www.windturbinesyndrome.com. Pierpont attributes this to the low-frequency sound, what she refers to as Wind Turbine Syndrome.

James argues that while the medical effects of windmills hasn't yet been fully studied, communities should proceed with caution.

Like smoking and fast food, "Do we really want to wait 30 years to determine if there are health risks?" he asked.

James recommends extending the minimum setbacks from residences to windmills to at least one mile. He explained that wind farms in the western part of the United States have not seen nearly the number of complaints as the eastern half - because the turbines are located much further from people's homes.

"I'm not against wind energy," James assured. "The message is that we have rushed into this too fast."

James did not speculate on whether Sherman Township should proceed with wind development but urged township "to make some good rules" to prevent potential concerns to public health.

abox@cadillacnews.com | 775-NEWS (6397)