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DTE has big plans for Thumb

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BAD AXE — Just how many turbines could Huron County see in the future? When will construction begin? And who will benefit from the project?

These were some of the questions posed during DTE Energy's Grantor Appreciation dinner Wednesday night at the Franklin Inn in Bad Axe.

Matt Wagner, DTE Energy manager of wind site development, said DTE Energy has easements signed with more than 200 grantors who represent nearly 50,000 acres in Huron County.

"We have to do a lot to accomplish 10 percent by 2015," said Trevor F. Lauer, DTE Retail Marketing vice president, in reference to the state's Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard (RPS) which requires 10 percent of power sold in the state has to be generated from renewable sources by 2015. " ... Once the process starts, it's going to start in a very major way across this county."

"(So) does 50,000 acres mean 50,000 turbines?" Huron County Commissioner Chairman Robert Haldane asked.

No, DTE Energy officials replied, explaining that because there is no specific plan approved, the company representatives can't give a specific number. They could, however, note that DTE Energy is exploring the possibility of a number somewhere in the hundreds.

"I know it sounds elusive, but we're talking a large number of turbines," Wagner said, adding that the turbines will make up a large park — not "50 megawatts here and 50 megawatts there."

Lauer said developments at the state and federal level are making wind energy prospects plentiful.

"I don't doubt there's any question that Huron County is going to be the epicenter of renewable energy development," he said.

"We have a lot of momentum ... to move forward," Lauer later added.

But that's not to say DTE Energy's project will be constructed any earlier than the originally anticipated 2011 because there currently is a regulatory period that has come on the heels of the signing into law of a comprehensive energy package Lansing lawmakers approved earlier this year, Lauer said.

However, he said things should be moving rather quickly around the state after July.

There still are transmission issues, DTE Energy representatives told landowners, that will take some time as work has to be done to upgrade the transmission lines to be able to handle all the power from future wind development projects. As a result, the company representatives told grantors in attendance at Monday's evening that the park more than likely will not be constructed until 2011.

"We need patience," said Irene M. Dimitry, DTE Energy Renewable Energy director, who noted most landowners probably had hoped things would happen sooner than 2011. " ... But the reality is that wind farms are very large and complex projects and they take a long time (to start up)."

Other factors DTE Energy officials said affect the amount of time it takes to erect a wind farm include long waits for turbines; ongoing studies; the requirement to create a 20-year plan with the state (to prove the project is cost effective and prudent); and other regulatory issues.

Lauer said while it may take time, DTE Energy is more than committed to creating a project in Huron County. In fact, he said, this planned project is the single biggest capital project the company is undertaking, planning to spend \$3 to \$4 billion over the next five to six years.

He encouraged the grantors to recommend to others that they sign easements with DTE Energy and get on board with the project.

"We will be the single biggest buyer and the single biggest developer of renewable energy in the state," Lauer said.

The key word in that quote is "state" as company officials said Wednesday evening that not all of DTE Energy's renewable energy will be developed via wind turbines erected in Huron County.

Wagner said even if DTE Energy has to get about 1,100 to 1,200 of megawatts of power from renewable energy resource, and even if the company were to reach that goal using only wind power — which absolutely won't happen — that would mean between 500 and 600 turbines (because the average turbine produces 2 megawatts of power).

So talks of DTE Energy erecting thousands of turbines in the Thumb are not accurate, the company officials said.

Dimitry said the number of 2,000 turbines being erected in the local area has been tossed in various news reports, but those reports were referencing studies that disclosed the potential the area has (i.e. how many turbines could be built in the area).

"Developers don't just look at what's possible — (they) look at what is feasible, required and likely," she said.

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