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SMALL TURBINE COLUMN:

Aesthetic Issues and Residential Wind Turbines

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One issue that seems to come up repeatedly at zoning hearings for residential wind turbines is aesthetics. This turns out to be a remarkably difficult issue to deal with. Anyone who has tried to deal with aesthetics in a public hearing knows only too well why art has never been created by a committee.

What is aesthetically pleasing is, by definition, an emotional issue. Something that strongly appeals visually to one person may invoke a completely opposite reaction in another. Many people report that they find wind turbines aesthetically appealing, even mesmerizing. To these folks, wind turbines fit right into the landscape. Others, however, just plain don't want to look at them sticking up in the air.

It's not that there aren't other tall objects on the landscape that attract our attention. AWEA's *Permitting Small Wind Turbines: A Handbook* mentions that: "Communities already accept water towers, billboards, relay towers, and utility lines as part of the landscape." Add to that silos on farms across the country, and a plethora of communications towers.

However, there are two major differences between these structures and residential wind systems. First, they don't move, as the blades of a wind turbine do. And second, many of the aforementioned are built without the community's input because they are either permitted uses or are exempt from zoning hearings. Given the opportunity to stop the erection of yet another structure in their viewshed, many disgruntled homeowners are only too willing to avail themselves of the opportunity to intercede negatively at a zoning hearing on a residential wind system.

There are some things that a potential residential wind system owner can do to make their wind system as unobtrusive as possible. It might be in the best interest of all for a wind system applicant to offer up some concessions at a hearing to assure the public that the wind system will intrude into the neighborhood as little as possible. A list of these might include the following assurances:

1. The wind system will not be painted a garish color, like "hunter orange" or "electric chartreuse." Wind turbines are painted by the manufacturer, and those colors have been thoroughly considered from two angles: to make sure that they blend in with the environment and to make them distinctive from other wind turbine models. In practice, the first takes precedence over the second. Manufacturers shy away from painting their products in fluorescent colors, to keep them from being intrusive on the skyline.

Towers are most often made of galvanized steel. They come from the factory bright and shiny, but soon weather to a muted gray color, which readily blends in with the sky. Several locations across the country require towers to be painted green to blend in with the surrounding vegetation.

In almost all the circumstances that I have seen where this was required, the green tower stands out far more than does a weathered-gray, unpainted galvanized tower.

2. The wind system will not sport any advertising other than the manufacturer's logo, which is usually on the tail or body of the turbine. People don't want a Nike swoosh blazing from above, flashing neon beer signs, or a tower painted like a Coke can in their neighborhood. Most people feel that corporate advertising is already too pervasive and intrusive. Abide by their simple wish to keep the neighborhood clear of such objectionable logos.
3. In a similar vein, the tower should not support any signs, other than perhaps some cautionary signs at the base.
4. The turbine should not be flooded with focus lighting, as is frequently seen with billboards. Remember, the goal is to minimize the perceived intrusiveness of the wind system, not to call attention to it when folks are trying to star-watch after dusk or at 3 a.m. when the neighborhood is asleep. The objective is low visibility, not intrusiveness.

Since residential turbines are mounted on towers in the 80-foot to 120-foot and higher range to take advantage of increased wind speeds, shorter towers should not be on the table, as this essentially makes a cost effective project decidedly less so.

Most people seeking to install wind systems live in either residential or rural areas. While these suggestions might seem like concessions to some, they are really perfectly logical for anyone living next to a tall visible structure like a wind turbine and tower. Think of how you would react if your neighbors put up a fire-engine red cell tower, complete with corporate advertising cascading down the tower, and lit up day and night for all to have to see. Pretty repulsive. Remember to consider your neighbors' concerns when "decorating" your tower.

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[Editors Note: The opinions expressed in this column are those of the author and may not reflect those of AWEA staff or board.]