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By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader Southwest Kansas is at the center of one of the best wind resources in the nation, and through a rigorous process, a site has been selected in Seward and Meade County for a new wind farm project.

Monday, county commissioners voted unanimously to approve a conditional use permit and a resolution authorizing the issuance of that permit for Cimarron Wind Project LLC.

Before the vote, project manager Jeff Schlichting gave a presentation, and he said the project is on a timeline of about five years..

“I would say this is sort of a best case scenario,” he said. “The actual construction process is relatively brief compared to most large projects.”

Schlichting said some wind projects can be built in as little as six months.

“A project of this size will probably take longer than that,” he said. “It most likely will be built in phases, so there will be multiple phases built at different times.”

Schlichting said an appropriate site, wind resource, functional generation facility and the ability to sell the project have to be determined when building a wind farm.

“You also have to have the documented leases, the rights to work on the site, to have your turbines there, access, the environmental review and clearance,” he said. “We’ve actually already done this process.”

Schlichting said a team of environmentalists have surveyed the proposed site of 93 square miles.

“We’ve had them do the research of what are the species that are out there, what should you be looking for, what’s the nature of the site and actually going out on the site, identifying the species that are there, the type of setting and are there any existing environmental hazards, underground storage tanks, above ground storage tanks,” he said.

Schlichting said all of these things have been catalogued, documented and recorded.

“We’ve gone through and done an endangered species assessment, an avian or bird study, a cultural resources study,” he said. “Are there historical or archeological artifacts out there that we need to be aware of?”

Schlichting said Cimarron Wind wants to be certain the host counties want and will support the project as the company moves forward, continues to invest in the project and ultimately build and operate it.

The site, according to Schlichting, is roughly a rectangular area stretching four miles from north to south and about 20 miles from east to west. The southern boundary is a mile north of Kansas Highway 160, starting about a mile east of U.S. Highway 83.

"It continues over past Plains into Meade County," Schlichting said. "The project size at this site that we've defined is 59,000 acres and up to 1,000 megawatts in this 93 square mile area."

Schlichting said if all goes well, the first phase of construction is expected in 2012, and the rest will be phased in over time.

"The property owners are typically long time Seward and Meade County families who've owned the property," he said. "It's been in their family for generations."

Schlichting said of the 59,000 proposed acres, leases have been signed for about 27,000 of those acres.

"Up to 400 individual turbines at 2.5 megawatts each interconnecting with one or more of the high voltage transmission lines that are planned for this area," he said. "We're currently looking at three different options for interconnecting by transmission."

Schlichting said there is also a great deal of potential in Southwest Kansas for wind energy export.

"There are transmission lines in the planning process, some of them actually under construction," he said. "That's essentially our road to market."

Schlichting said this is a win-win project for the county.

"There are benefits to the county as well as the project," he said. "We've got the wind resource here. We've got a low impact site, and so far, to my knowledge, we've not had any negative response to the project generally."

The Seward County Planning Commission recently hosted a public hearing on the project, and Schlichting said there were no protests at the hearing.

"We've got an experienced and proven development team," he said. "There are benefits to the region. What we're promising to put in here is a state of the art world class wind facility."

Schlichting said the way the conditional use permit and resolution are structured means Cimarron Wind will not break ground until everything is in place, including financing for the project.

"It also obviously means an additional income stream for the project landowners, an increase in the long-term employment base locally and ongoing economic benefits throughout the project's life," he said.

The commission's motion to approve the CUP proposed by Cimarron Wind was subject to the following conditions:

o Before any construction begins, CWP must provide the commission a final development plan that includes the following agreements acceptable to the board: a payment in lieu of taxes agreement, road maintenance agreement, security agreement and decommissioning agreements;

o CWP shall also provide:

o A detail of the project boundaries;

o Road crossings;

o Ingress and egress locations;

o Locations of all existing buildings and structures within a 1/2 mile of the project boundaries;

o Electrical transmission lines and facilities;

o Utilities;

o Utility easements;

o Underground pipelines and underground utilities within the project area; and

o 100-year flood plain boundaries.

o The final development shall be subject to the approval of the board of county commissioners; and

o This information must be provided to the commission within 18 months or the approval of the CUP application will be considered void, a new application will need to be submitted, and another public hearing will need to take place.

The commission also approved a resolution authorizing the issuance of the CUP for Cimarron Wind.

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