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FreedomWorks says hydropower project requires community support

Details

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Earlier this month, Grant County was presented with a unique proposal when Tim Williamson, owner of FreedomWorks LLC, presented his goal of constructing a massive pump storage hydro project in the area.

Williamson presented his plan for the Ulysses Pump Storage Hydro Project to the Grant County Commission and received overall support from the commissioners.

Williamson, who is from Harpers Ferry, runs FreedomWorks LLC in West Virginia and said this would be the largest hydro storage project in the world as well as the largest project his company has overseen. The project would consist of an upper reservoir in the Bismarck area and a lower reservoir in the Greenland Gap area. Overall, the surface area of both reservoirs will span 2,181 acres with seven miles of tunnels and provide four gigawatts of power.

“I live here in West Virginia,” Williamson said. “I love the land and the people of West Virginia. This state has been very good to me. As a result, I felt it was high time for me to pay West Virginia back for providing me with so much opportunity over the past 30 years.”

Williamson explained he has worked in other areas to construct the project, including an effort in Tucker County which was ended due to being unable to receive a permit to build on National Forest lands.

Between the upper and lower reservoirs, the proposed area would impact an estimated 33 landowners. Current sketches include portions, or all, of 16 properties at the upper reservoir, 16 at the lower reservoir, and one at the proposed pumphouse location.

However, Williamson said he is working to visit each impacted landowner personally to discuss their feelings on the proposal.

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“Our goal is to earn an opportunity to do business with landowners in Grant County and not swindle anyone,” Williamson said. “To me, this is a community project, first and foremost. This won’t happen without community support and it will not happen without community involvement.” Williamson also clarified that landowners who were interested in working with the project would not be required to sell their land and could choose to lease to the project for a longer-term revenue source.

“One thing I am asking landowners is whether they would prefer a lease or an outright sale. As a company, we would prefer a lease, which, I think works out because it is a source of long-term revenue for landowners. That being said, we are completely open to outright sales. And when we are talking about the value of a property, we are starting at the market value, not the assessed value, and then negotiating up from there. There will never be a case when we are negotiating down from the net present value.”

Williamson said both the IRS tax code and the company would prefer to engage in leases without landowners.

“I want folks to understand that we are coming with our hat in our hand, we are not coming to take anything from anyone. If there is one thing I would like to convey, it is that this is an opportunity, not something that I, the county or the state is trying to shove down anyone’s throat. My goal in all of these projects is to ensure landowners have royalties from the project - not just a check that comes in once a month or once a year or once a quarter.”

The Grant County Development Authority has been working with FreedomWorks on the project, pointing to the possible creation of multiple, including upward of 50 permanent, operation jobs and an estimated 40 additional local jobs indirectly created in support of the facility. This is in addition to millions of potential county tax dollars the project could generate.

Williamson said the project could play a positive role in the county.

“Since Mount Storm Power Station began operations in the 1960s, Grant County has been an energy center for West Virginia,” Williamson said. “However, I believe Grant County is destined to be West Virginia’s new energy center, too. Huge transmission capacity, existing wind farms, and proximity to markets 100 miles east, make Grant County the perfect location to provide power loads to the east. Grant County and our proposed Ulysses pump storage hydro project could help fulfill a great need.”

One concern cited about the project was the impact on wildlife in the area, including endangered bat species, bumble bees, fish and birds.

Williamson said he recognizes these issues and that he plans to work closely with officials to ensure the project is as harmless as possible. This includes effects on timber loss to landowners and habitats.

“Project feasibility studies will explore measures and actions to mitigate potential permanent timber loss on both public and private lands,” Williamson said. “Options may include reforestation of additional acreage of new spruce restoration funded by the project with West Virginia Division of Natural Resources oversight.”

Williamson also clarified they are working to ensure the location has as little effect on the community as possible, already adjusting the location to avoid the cemetery at Locust Grove Church.

Williamson founded FreedomWorks in 2007 but has been working on energy projects since 1979, such as multiple solar, wind and geothermal projects, including the completion of new utility-scale wind and solar energy projects in Texas, Colorado, Maryland, Virginia, California, Mexico, Egypt, Jordan, Kenya, Angola, and Indonesia as well as new commercial and residential-scale solar projects in Massachusetts and Washington, D.C.

Williamson clarified that while he has been working five years on this project, several important feasibility studies will be required if the plans move forward in Grant County.

“The feasibility study period is estimated to last approximately two years before a final feasibility report can be completed,” Williamson said. “If the study supports a financial investment decision, construction is anticipated to take another three years, before the project reaches acceptance to begin in-service commercial operations.”

Feasibility studies will include: a preliminary civil engineering study; a preliminary electrical engineering and design; a hydrologic assessment; a biological assessment; a cultural assessment and a socioeconomic assessment performed with Grant County.

“Our proposal cannot go forward without public support,” Williamson said. “My job is to earn the trust of county residents, and secure a permit from Grant County Commission to study the feasibility of this project. We need the community behind this. I told the commission and I will reiterate, we have no intent to force anything. We aren’t talking about eminent domain or condemnation of land. I truly hope we have found a home here in Grant County and do think it would be a great thing for the community, but that is really for the community to decide and I respect that.”

For more information on the project and to see a map of the proposed location, visit <https://www.freedomworksllc.net/> or grantcountypress.com.

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