



Turbines boosting governments' bank accounts share

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Photo by: Rick Danzl/The News-Gazette

Turbines in Invenergy's California Ridge wind farm dot the landscape of Pilot Township in western Vermilion County, north of Oakwood.



In its first year on the property tax rolls, the California Ridge wind farm contributed more than \$2.3 million to the coffers of schools, community colleges, counties, townships, libraries and fire districts in Champaign and Vermilion counties.

Nowhere was the wind farm windfall bigger than in Armstrong, where a school system which barely tops 200 students raked in more than \$1 million in new tax dollars.

That's more than a third of the system's \$2.9 million in total revenue last year. About \$1.5 million of that was local property tax revenue.

Superintendent Bill Mulvaney said the wind turbines more than doubled the school system's equalized assessed valuation.

"They have been a huge boon ... and from a financial point of view, they will keep us alive for a minimum of 10 years," said Mulvaney, who knew the big pay day was coming.

Like Mulvaney, Gifford schools Superintendent Rod Grimsley had a formula to calculate tax revenue per each of the 22 windmills in his district. The estimate was \$120,000. The actual was even better — Gifford schools got \$133,328, according to the Champaign County Treasurer's office.

"In school business, we always guess a little low on revenue," Grimsley said.

He said the additional dollars won't put the district ahead of the financial curve but help provide some stability after yearly declines in state aid. This year, the Gifford school district will get \$155,000 less in state money than it did four years ago.

"Obviously, it's a big benefit to our district," Grimsley said, "and we're blessed we are in an area that does have (wind turbines)."

Altogether, 29 different taxing bodies in the two-county area received property tax revenue from the 214-megawatt wind farm, which was supported by some and scorned by others during heated zoning hearings in 2011.

Those in Vermilion received more of the pot, mostly because the majority of the turbines are in that county. In addition to Armstrong and Gifford schools, the other big chunks of revenue went to Vermilion County's government (\$335,532), Danville Area Community College (\$139,554), the Oakwood school district (\$135,546) and Pilot Township (\$130,245).

For DACC, the bonus revenue will help "hold the line on tuition increases so they are more modest," school President Alice Jacobs said. She said the college is certainly grateful for the investment in the community.

Even before construction began on Invenenergy's 130-plus turbines that stretch from Pilot Township in western Vermilion County to Compromise Township in eastern Champaign County, there was speculation in Armstrong about the expected revenue boost and how the money would be spent.

"You try not to count your chickens before they're hatched," Mulvaney said. "I just kept cautioning everybody: 'It's not ours until it comes into our accounts.' I knew it would probably double revenues, but I certainly wasn't willing to spend any money until we had it in our pockets."

This fall, it was in the bank, and discussions ensued among Mulvaney, school board members and school officials on how to use the money.

For starters, possibly all 130 students at Armstrong Township High School will soon have their own laptop or notebook, similar to what Arcola schools did this fall on a larger scale, thanks to \$643,000 in donations. The 1-to-1 technology initiative, as it's known, is one educational program Mulvaney's district is considering with its new funds. Also being discussed: a renovation of the high school science lab.

"More than anything, that money has got to be spent on the kids," said Mulvaney, adding that there's been concern that the board will raise teacher and administrator salaries. "There are just a lot of things we are going to do program-wise that we would never be able to do otherwise."

Outside of educational programming, Mulvaney said their nearly 100-year-old high school building could use some attention. Its age is especially evident on steamy fall days (no air conditioning) and frigid winter ones (the ancient boiler system has seen better decades).

The district was in sound financial shape prior to this windfall, Mulvaney said. But most of the \$1 million will be socked away for a rainy day anyway, he said, partly because there's so much uncertainty surrounding state funding of schools.

"And I think that's just being prudent," Mulvaney said.

Windfall of new money

Tables show how much new property tax revenue each taxing body received in the last few months from the California Ridge wind farm. This is the first year the turbines were added to the tax rolls in Champaign and Vermilion counties. There are 104 turbines in Vermilion and 30 in Champaign.

VERMILION COUNTY

Taxing district	Tax revenue
Armstrong Grade School	\$490,810
Armstrong High School	\$448,684
Vermilion County	\$335,532
Danville Area Community College	\$139,554
Oakwood School District	\$135,546
Pilot Township	\$130,245
Vermilion Co. Conservation District	\$27,632
Prairieview-Ogden School District	\$24,650
Blue Grass Fire District	\$16,944
Fithian-Muncie-Collison Fire District	\$11,995
Pilot Cemetery	\$11,012
Ogden/Royal Fire District	\$10,298
Middlefork/Pilot townships	\$9,186
Oakwood Library	\$7,520
Oakwood Fire District	\$4,104
Vermilion Regional Airport	\$230
TOTAL	\$1,803,942

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

Taxing district	Tax revenue
Gifford School District	\$133,328
Armstrong High District	\$111,929
Compromise Township	\$58,990
Champaign County	\$57,248
Prairieview-Ogden School District	\$50,654
Parkland College	\$40,116
Rantoul High District	\$31,477
Gifford Fire District	\$17,082
St. Joseph-Ogden High District	\$9,011
ChampCo Forest Preserve	\$6,263
Ogden Township	\$3,396
Ogden/Royal Fire District	\$2,929
Compromise-Harwood-Kerr Multi-Township	\$1,981
Drainage districts	\$208
Ogden/Stanton Multi-Township	\$164
TOTAL	\$524,776

Total tax revenue in both counties: \$2,328,718

Note: Two taxing bodies — Armstrong High School and the Prairie View-Ogden School District — are in both Champaign and Vermilion counties.