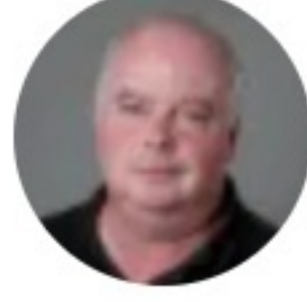


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Two large East Bay solar projects proposed in undeveloped area

Residents oppose development north of Livermore



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OAKLAND — Plans to build two large solar farms on agricultural land in Livermore — a proposal some say is flat-out wrong because it will take away open space — remain on track to go forward.

One project, by Intersect Power of San Francisco, calls for a solar energy and storage plant on about 410 acres, roughly 2.5 miles north of Livermore. The second, Livermore Community Solar Farm, proposed by Oakland's SunWalker Energy, would take up about 81 acres.

The projects would be built on agricultural land along Cayetano Creek on both sides of North Livermore Avenue next to Manning and May School roads. Cows can be seen grazing on the undeveloped land, which has been designated a scenic corridor.

The panels would sit about 8 feet above the ground and be visible to passersby, though the developers say they plan to lessen the impact with landscaping. There also would be maintenance buildings on the sites.

If approved, the farms are expected to provide enough power for up to 25,000 homes and businesses. Supporters say the developments will provide a source of green energy and that a portion of the site will be dedicated as a public hiking trail.

Opponents say they want Alameda County to put the two projects on hold until the county develops a policy for large-scale solar projects, including where they should be allowed.

On Tuesday, a county board of supervisors committee opted not to stop the projects, despite about a dozen Livermore residents weighing in during the meeting to say they are against the farms.

"The county risks permanently destroying the environment to save the environment," Sue Springer, a Livermore resident, told supervisors during the virtual meeting.

On Aug. 10, the Livermore City Council asked the county to delay allowing any large-scale solar projects until it has a solar policy. In July, the Alameda County Agricultural Advisory Committee also recommended the county hold off until a solar policy is in place.

"New county solar policies are needed now to provide a clear basis for decision-makers, and clarity to the public and renewable energy providers for the appropriate siting, scale and operations of large-scale solar power facilities," Livermore Mayor John Marchand said in an Aug. 27 letter to Chris Bazar, director of the Alameda County Community Development Agency.

"We urge Alameda County to develop solar policies that carefully balance development of renewable, utility-scale solar facilities with crucial city and county shared open space and agricultural development policies and objectives," the mayor wrote.

Attorney Robert Selna, who represents residents opposed to the projects, said he will fight the committee's recommendations while noting he supports protecting the environment.

Supervisors initially called for a solar policy in 2011, Selna said, and a year later decided that no solar developments should move forward until a policy was approved.

Since then, the Livermore proposals have percolated and moved forward, he said. The black and white solar panels would be installed at spots where they could optimize sunlight, according to the companies.

The county committee, made up of Supervisors Scott Haggerty and Nate Miley, agreed the county needed a clear policy on large solar projects and where they could be located. They also asked the county staff to craft a policy for the full board to consider later.

However, they did not recommend stopping the two ones north of Livermore.

"There's a couple of projects that are in the pike right now," Haggerty said, referring to the Livermore developments. "I don't know if we can change the rules on them."

A final environmental impact report for the SunWalker farm will next go before the East County Board of Zoning Adjustments later this month. An environmental impact report for the larger Aramis project is still in the works. Both will need to be approved by the full board of supervisors.

Supervisors have already indicated solar projects should be judged on a case-by-case basis, Haggerty said.

"On Tuesday, Haggerty and Miley decided that applications for hundreds of acres of solar panels in a scenic valley would move forward without the policy," Selna said Wednesday in an email. "Said plainly, the county's nine-year failure has resulted in needless conflict between renewable energy and the natural environment. Other counties have completed this work. Alameda County seems uniquely handicapped in making the much-needed transition to renewable energy."

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Haggerty and Miley noted that a legal opinion from a county attorney indicated that supervisors would need to declare a moratorium to stop the two solar projects.

Some residents were not happy with the two supervisors' take.

"Just because there's an inch of dirt doesn't mean we have to cover it," John Burke said at Tuesday's meeting. "There's better ways to make electricity."

Opponents also maintain the projects are counter to Measure D, which Alameda County voters passed in 2000. The measure severely restricts development in eastern Alameda County in areas designated for agriculture and open space.

"We don't believe in a one-size-fits-all," county planning director Albert Lopez told supervisors Tuesday about deciding on whether a solar project can proceed.

Lopez said he expects a draft solar development policy could be developed within 60 days.

"I am sure if we have more debates (on these issues), they will be spirited ones," Haggerty said.

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