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Utility-Scaled Solar Isn't the Answer

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With two proposals on the table for a large utility-scaled solar development that would sprawl over 800 acres in the open space north of Livermore, the hesitancy and point-blank disapproval is reasonable.

It's not a rejection of solar in itself. It's a matter of asking ourselves what are we destroying in our local environment in the name of saving it? And while for-profit solar companies can make the argument that infill solar panels are more expensive to build, organizations within the Tri-Valley have found long-term electrical cost savings. Las Positas College, the City of Dublin and Pleasanton's Amador Valley High School all boast solar structures over their parking lots, resulting in reduced energy bills, shade for cars and a means of supporting California's energy goals.

Public letters submitted to Andrew Young, Alameda County Planning Department Senior Planner, in response to a notice of preparation of reports on the proposed developments spell out concerns and call-outs from various sources.

Doug Bell, East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) Wildlife Program Manager, noted in his statement that the District supports renewable energy development "in a responsible manner that balances the need for renewable energy production with the protection of natural, cultural and visual resources in our region." But he further pointed out that the dryland crops and grazing, which are current uses of many of the projects' parcels, provide habitat for wildlife that would be lost due to construction. He called upon the environmental impact report (EIR) to consider zoning laws, impacts to wildlife, and avian and bat fatality resulting from interaction with the projects' infrastructure.

Attorney Robert Selna, of Selna Partners LLC, agrees. Representing homeowners situated near the proposed project sites, Selna stated, "Placing sheep under 8-foot-high solar panels that obscure the ground much of the day to abate weeds is not the common understanding of agriculture, and it's not what the code intended," Selna explained.

He said it's a false narrative to claim the proposal would adhere to the Ag Management Plan.

But for Selna, the crux of the issue from a public accountability standpoint rests on what he called the Alameda County Board of Supervisors and Planning Department's reversal of a promise made on the record.

"In 2011, the Board of Supervisors and Planning Department made a commitment to complete a utility solar policy study, and they didn't finish," he said. "In 2012, when they were approving the most recent utility-scale project in Alameda County, called the Cool Earth Project, on record, on video, and in front of God and everyone, the Board got a commitment from the Planning Department that they would complete that study before they approved any other solar projects."

He noted that the policy study would determine appropriate locations and the scale of such projects; the Board would form a General Plan amendment, so that the zoning was clear on where these types of project should go in the county.

"They never completed the study ... and they never completed the General Plan amendment," Selna said, referring to the February 2012 meeting. "That's critical; these are direct grounds to challenge these projects, and the Board of Supervisors and the Planning Department are failing their duty to the public and going back on their promise."

Developing massive regions with a "sea of glass," as many have called the proposal, is a short-sighted response to meeting California's energy goals. Let's continue exploring alternatives for implementing solar in the Tri-Valley, because it doesn't make sense to destroy the environment to protect it.

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