

Questions raised about solar 'farms'

SOLAR

By Marcia Pobzeznik

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TIVERTON - "Solar farm" sounds bucolic, Jeremy Sager said, but having thousands of solar panels covering what was once farmland or woodlands is more of an electricity-manufacturing facility that should not be allowed in rural areas.

Sager was one of several residents who raised questions about the ever-increasing numbers of ground solar array proposals that are being filed with the town. Some are so big that the last Town Council voted to seek repeal of the new solar ordinance so it does what it was initially intended to do: allow farmers to install solar arrays to help fund their energy costs and help diminish their need to subdivide their farmland and sell it off.

A public hearing on the repeal is initially slated for Nov. 26 before the new Town Council, but the meeting will include the ceremonial swearing-in and seating of the council, so the repeal could be delayed.

Embracing green energy does not mean you should have to sacrifice the environment and historic properties, Julie Manafort said, referring to the old forests and farmland that could be affected by several proposed solar farm proposals now before the town.

One is the 72-acre Wingover Farm on Crandall Road where she grew up. It is being eyed for a 35-acre solar farm that would necessitate the removal of old forests and relocation

or demolition of a 19th-century farmhouse.

Another, discussed at length Wednesday night at the Planning Board meeting, is a 60-acre solar array on 110 acres on the east side of Brayton Road, at addresses 390, 394 and 446, on land that is now woodland. Susan Anderson of the town's Historic Preservation Advisory Board said there is a farmhouse on the property dating to 1890, historic stone walls, and woodland that grew from former farmland.

A 10-acre solar array is being proposed for what is called Cook Farm at 4366 Main Road on the east side of Main Road. There is also a proposal for a 30-acre on solar array at 960 Stafford Road, on the east side across from Old Stafford Road, but that proposal has not yet been heard by the Planning Board.

The town also has talked about putting solar panels on the town landfill once it is closed in about two years.

A question Planning Board Chairman Stuart Hardy would like answered is how much capacity does the National Grid transmission line system have, and if the town allows the proposals now before it, will there be enough capacity in the future for farmers and the town?

He had to ask it several times of those representing the Brayton Road proposal.

"I'd like a letter from National See **SOLAR, A8**

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in agriculture and woodlands.

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Grid stating how much renewable capacity National Grid has on its transmission lines and what will remain for other solar projects,” Hardy said. “The letter gives us some idea how your project will impact projects after you.”

Hardy told attorney Nicholas Goodyear and engineer David Rousseau, representing the Brayton Road proposal, that he would like that letter upfront “so we know right away how much capacity is being taken.” He also wants a letter from the state Department of Environmental Management about any concerns it may have with the proposed solar array that is within the Basket Swamp conservation area that is a National Heritage site.

It could be difficult to get those and it could take months. Goodyear said “it's unrealistic' to make those demands.

The town stands to gain \$105,000 in annual tax revenue from the solar array, Goodyear said.

Another proposal discussed was the Cook Farm solar array at 4366 Main Road. It would have at least 9,000 solar panels, Sager said. The project is proposed by his neighbor Kevin Sanford.

Sanford said just 10 to 12 percent of his 67-acre farm would have solar panels. A portion of the farm would be conservation land and there is a plan to sell up to five lots for housing, with the rest remaining

“This one looks very benign to me,” John Berg, resident agent with the Nature Conservancy said of the Cook Farm proposal that would have conservation land as one of the many uses, but there are questions people have because the proposals are so new.

Planning Board member Melissa Hutchinson said she'd like to see a schematic site section so people can get an idea what this would look like on the ground.

Sager said there is also a concern about how long the solar companies might be involved and what would happen if they abandon their projects if the market changes so it is no longer profitable for them.

Town Planner William Compton said there is a provision in the current ordinance that would require a bond to be posted with the town. “The town would have surety to decommission the site,” Compton said.

“This is a long way from being approved,” Planning Board Vice Chairwoman Susan Gill said. The board and residents still have time to study the proposals and ask questions, she said.

But the numbers are mounting.

“Every five minutes we get a new solar application,” Hardy said.

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