

Westlake solar farm plans scrapped by energy company

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Renewable energy company Energix US has scrapped plans to build a solar farm in Westlake, the company told the county this month.

Energix first announced plans in April to construct a solar farm on 220 acres in the Westlake area between Virginia 122 and the Bettys Creek section of Smith Mountain Lake.

The proposed solar farm had faced criticism from the lake community since its announcement. During a virtual community meeting in April, several members of the community questioned the solar farm's impact on the environment and whether the location would be better suited to residential housing.

In June, Energix agreed to delay its proposal to give Franklin County time to update its regulations on renewable energy companies such as solar farms, which are growing in popularity in the state. The county's regulations were still being reviewed when Energix made the announcement Sept. 1.

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In email to the county, Yarden Golan, the company's director of public affairs, said that due to feedback from county officials and residents, the company is relocating the project to avoid the designated growth area where the proposed solar farm was to be located.

Golan said the company would work with Franklin County to find a more suitable location. No information was provided on any alternate locations in the county.

While there has been a concerted push for more renewable energy in Virginia, the movement has gained little momentum in the Roanoke Valley when it comes to major projects.

The Westlake proposal would have been the region's first utility-scale solar farm. And a wind farm proposed six years ago in Botetourt County has faced a number of setbacks.

The latest came in July, when the county's zoning administrator ruled that Rocky Forge Wind did not qualify for a statewide exemption passed by the General Assembly for some projects that were delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because a final site plan was not approved by May 26, a special exception permit granted to the project had expired, Drew Pearson determined.

Apex Clean Energy, the project's developer, appealed that decision to the county's board of zoning appeals. The issue is scheduled to come up at an Oct. 12 meeting.

Meanwhile, Apex has sued the county and Pearson in Botetourt County Circuit Court, saying that he lacked the legal authority to make his decision. A second lawsuit, filed late last year by a group of citizens opposed to the 612-foot turbines, challenges a permit issued to Rocky Forge by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality.

As for solar energy, the region's mountainous terrain makes it more challenging to find flat and open spaces that get enough sunlight to make a project viable.

Of the approximately 60 permits issued statewide by DEQ for utility-scale solar projects, only two are for facilities west of Roanoke. Those two solar farms, both proposed for Wythe County, are not yet in operation.

In January, the Pulaski County Board of Supervisors approved a special use permit for a 2,700-acre solar farm near the New River Valley Airport. The developers have not yet obtained a permit from DEQ, which is the next step in a regulatory process that can take months or years.

Farther to the west, some developers plan to build solar panels on abandoned coal strip mines that are high enough on mountains to capture sufficient energy from the sun.

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