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TOP STORY

Amherst County Board of Supervisors | Piney River solar project

Energix withdraws permit for Amherst solar facility, will rework request

Justin Faulconer

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A view of the area where the Piney River Solar project would be installed, if granted approval from Amherst County officials to proceed.
Paige Dingler, New Era-Progress

Justin Faulconer



Energix Renewables, a company pursuing a special exception permit to operate a utility-scale solar operation on about 170 acres in the Piney River area of Amherst County, withdrew its permit a few hours before a public hearing the county’s board of supervisors was set to hold May 16.

The project called Piney River Solar sought the permit for two parcels totaling more than 400 acres with road frontage on Virginia 151 near the Nelson County border and Roses Mill Road. The parcels previously were used as a tailing storage area in connection with the U.S. Titanium mining operation that spanned land in Amherst and Nelson counties, the site of a large amount of solid waste in violation of Amherst County zoning regulations, according to the application from Energix.

“The Piney River Solar proposal would see this registered brownfield site with current historic difficulties, brought fully into compliance with local ordinances and part of a cleaner environment for the future of Amherst County,” a recent letter to the county from Shawn Hershberger, development manager for the Piney River solar project, said.

Hershberger briefly addressed the Amherst County Board of Supervisors during the public comments portion near the start of the May 16 meeting.

“We did make the hard decision to withdraw that application today with intent of putting pen back to paper, modifying it and making it an application we think will be better reflective of the neighbors’ wishes, the county’s wishes and still something that will still be a win-win scenario for everyone,” Hershberger told the board.

Hershberger thanked the county for its review and neighboring property owners and residents for their feedback.

The Amherst County Planning Commission voted March 16 to recommend denial of the special exception permit following a public hearing where eight area residents, including a few from Nelson County, spoke on concerns with the project’s unknowns and impacts the solar operation would have on scenic views in that area.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency still regularly monitors the area where the solar farm is proposed, according to Energix’s application. “This utility-scale solar project will revitalize previously disturbed land with limited future uses into a net-positive project for the community,” an excerpt from the application states.

Karla Hernandez, external affairs manager at Energy Renewables, said in a statement that Piney River Solar LLC takes community input very seriously and that factored into the decision to withdraw the application. Piney River Solar plans to soon resubmit the application with key changes reflecting feedback received on the proposed project, she said.

“We are committed to working with the community to improve our project and make it harmonious with nearby land uses,” Hernandez said. “We are confident that Piney River Solar will soon deliver American-made renewable energy to benefit the local economy and our environment.”

Skyler Zunk, co-founder and CEO of Energy Right, a nonprofit involved in clean energy discussions, attended the May 16 meeting with intent to speak. He told the board during public comments the nonprofit advocates for property rights, as long as applicants for solar operations are not adversely affecting neighbors.

“It’s very notable it’s proposed on a brownfield,” Zunk said. “That is what counties will go after all the time when looking for projects to site if it’s not taking up forest land or if it’s not taking up farmland. Brownfields are what everybody almost unanimously agrees are good spots for solar because there usually isn’t the higher and better use.”

Zunk said he appreciates the county’s “diligent work” in reviewing solar operations. The Piney River project marked the largest scale in three such operations so far for the county in the past few years, county officials have said. The previous two received the board’s approval.

Energy Right opposes any action by state lawmakers to strip counties of the authority in regulating such operations, Zunk said.

“We think that’s wrong,” Zunk said. “We think that counties that are doing this diligently and permitting good projects and saying no to bad ones are doing it right.”

Tom Martin, the Amherst board’s chair, said the contract for the property in Energix’s application was signed in 2019 and the permit request was pulled two-and-a-half hours before Tuesday’s hearing. He asked county staff and County Attorney Mark Popovich to look into ordinances that set a timeframe on when petitioners and applicants can postpone or withdraw requests.

“It’s definitely their right. We had a lot of citizens that came out for that,” Martin said. “Just to go through [all] that, have the citizens come out, and they just pull it — it just kind of sets me a little wrong.”

By Justin Faulconer

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