

Opponents dig in

Posted By JENNIFER BURDEN, THE PACKET AND TIMES

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For 29 years, Cindy Hillard has enjoyed the view of farmland from the front window of her country home on Taylor Line in Severn Township. Within the year, she will have a new vista -- a sea of solar panels.

Recurrent Energy, a San Francisco-based independent power producer, was awarded contracts for seven large solar-panel projects in both Severn and Oro-Medonte townships by the Ontario Power Authority (OPA) in April.

One of those projects, a 90-acre solar farm, is a stones throw away from her front porch. But it isn't the proximity of the solar panels to her home that has Hillard up in arms; it's the project's location on agricultural land. "I'm opposed to all solar farms, not just the one across the road from me," Hillard said. "I don't think they should be using any agricultural land because our farmland is disappearing because of development."

Hillard is a member of Concerned Citizens Group of Severn Township (CCGST,) a group of a dozen residents that have joined forces to fight all solar-farm projects in both Oro-Medonte and Severn townships that are situated on farmland.

"I'm not against solar energy," she said, adding she supports small scale solar-panel projects of 10 kw or less. "Small local projects are good for the community (but) they belong on rooftops, not our farmland."

The main concern of the group is the long-term impact of these solar farms. Nancy Robinson, chair of CCGST, said with less than 15% of Ontario's land being used for agricultural purposes, the government has a responsibility to preserve as much land as they can for farmers so they can feed a growing population. "It's frustrating. It seems like they are taking away the futures of our families. I feel as if where will it stop? It will all be too late," Robinson said.

Robinson is worried about the effect the solar panels will have on the soil underneath them. She was told by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture that the soil beneath the panels will be exposed to intense heat, causing the soil to bake and disrupting the carbon and nitrogen fixing, which in turn breeds noxious weeds. When the baked soil is hit with runoff water from rain or cleaning, the toxic soil will deposit itself in the streams and rivers running through the solar-farm sites.

In respect to the Taylor Line project, the group is worried about the North River, which runs through the land and leads to Matchedash Bay, a wetland protected by the Ontario Eastern Habitat Joint Venture, a group associated with the Ministry of Environment. "The solar panels are metres away from our river. We shouldn't have to fight for our waters," Robinson said.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Recurrent Energy is hosting its first round of public meetings on its projects starting June 29 and is inviting residents and anyone interested in their work to come express their concerns and suggestions, such as the ones from CCGST.

"In terms of public consultation, this is only the first. The public has two chances to come in and comment on the projects," David Brochu, Recurrent Energy's managing director for Canada, said on Friday. Brochu said this is an opportunity for the public to come forward with areas of concern, whether it is a vulnerable waterway or concern about soil erosion, that will be taken into account when finalizing the project designs.

"This is a way for the community to identify risks we haven't already identified. These projects are very early in their development stages," he said, adding they have an obligation to modify designs in order to fulfill the strict regulations placed upon them by the Ontario government under the Green Energy Act.

For example, the projects cannot be built on Class 1 or 2 agricultural land and must mitigate all risks to the environment in the area. "We agree we need to maintain Class 1 and 2 farmland and we support the Ontario government's regulations," Brochu said. Brochu added that, contrary to some people's opinions, solar-panels have "very little impact" on the land.

He said the panels are four to five feet above the ground and do not emit heat that would "bake" the soil. In fact, they provide shade for the soil, he said. "(That's) sort of one of those rumours that gets around and it's certainly not true," he said, adding they do not want to create any erosion and are extremely careful about run-off management.

He said one of their contract requirements is that the land they lease for these solar farms must be returned back to agricultural use once their lease is up. "These systems will be built with very minimal impact to the soil," he said.

The comments and feedback from people attending the public meetings will be taken into consideration as Recurrent Energy drafts more detailed reports, Brochu said. The timeline for these projects is still indefinite, Brochu said, but they expect construction to begin by spring 2011.

The CCGST, along with North Simcoe MPP Garfield Dunlop have taken issue with the Green Energy Act, which excludes municipalities from the decision making process of where these types of projects should go and who they should be awarded to.

Under the Green Energy Act, the OPA was given the power to award contracts to firms under the Ontario feed-in-tariff program (FIT) without consulting local governments first. The FIT program is North America's first comprehensive guaranteed pricing structure for renewable electrical production, which offers stable prices under long-term contracts for energy generated from renewable sources, such as solar panels.

"It upsets me that I don't have a say and can't discuss other options," Hillard said. "It takes away my right to think globally and act locally." Dunlop agrees. "I'm with the people on this one. The process should have included the municipalities. That's why we have a municipal government," he said. "This time the government has dropped the ball."

But Brochu has assured that these public meetings will be more than just information sessions; they will be an opportunity for residents to have a say in the projects. "We don't want to miss anybody's comment," he said.

For specific information on Recurrent Energy's solar-panel projects in your area, visit www.ontariosolarfuture.ca.

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DISSENTING VIEWS

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Cindy Hilliard Severn Township resident

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David Brochu, Recurrent Energy official

Public meetings:

Date: Tuesday June 29, 2010 Time: 6-9 p.m.

Where: Hawkestone Community Hall, 3 Allen St., Hawkestone, Ont.

Project names: Projects Orillia 1, Orillia 2 and Orillia 3

Date: Wednesday June 30, 2010 Time: 6-9p.m.

Where: Oakwood Community Centre, 290 Park Street, Victoria Harbour, Ont.

Project name: Waubaushene 3 Date: Wednesday July 7, 2010 Time: 6-9p.m.

Where: Coldwater Community Centre, 11 Michael Anne Drive, Coldwater, Ont.

Project names: Waubaushene 4 and Waubaushene 5

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