Stafford Business Park Solar Project Draws Mixed Response; Citizens' Rally

Upcoming

Tom Mongelli Reporting
thomas.mongelli@mrgnj.com

Developers of the Stafford Township Business Park find obstacles on the road to an alternative energy project they hope to build.

The Walters Group, which paid in the tens of millions of dollars to close and cap the old Stafford Landfill in exchange for development rights to the site, now seeks permission to build a solar and wind power system on the capped dump adjacent to the growing commercial and residential complex. It is home to several major retailers, more moving in, and the site of more than 500 living units.

The hearing is part of a process required by the Pinelands Commission for a land use diversion. The capped landfill was designated as park land in a 2006 memo of agreement.

Company executives say the alternative energy site would satisfy about 70 percent of the electricity needs for the stores and homes. But homeowners who attended the hearing weren't convinced that the project represents the township's best interests, and remained skeptical that the site was the optimal spot for it.

Emile DeVito of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation considered the project a violation of the 2006 agreement. Walters executives contend that it's the only viable spot. If that's the case, asks DeVito, what provisions exist to replace the land?

"The [New Jersey] Green Acres diversion rules are set up to make sure that there's adequate compensation for things that just can't be avoided," said DeVito. "It's my contention that there are alternatives to this diversion of parkland. This solar facility can be on the parking lot and on the rooftops of the mall. There's probably more space there than there is on the parkland."

DeVito concedes that the project will move forward if state officials agree with the developer's position. That leaves open the question of compensation for the loss of park land.

"[The public]s not being compensated at some lease rate determined by the town. That's not appropriate," said DeVito. "The public of New Jersey needs to be compensated for 120 acres, and for the value of the land that's being made available for a commercial facility."

Walters spokesman Joseph Del Duca dismissed the concept of solar generators in parking areas as impractical for several reasons.

"We don't own the Target site and we don't own the Costco site. So we have no control over those parking lots," Del Duca said. "They wouldn't permit solar panels in their parking facilities for a number of reasons. One, they obscure the visibility of the building. Two, they create a safety hazard. Three, they're much more expensive to install because when you put them on top of a landfill, they...start at about four feet and go to about 12 feet in height. In order to put them in a parking lot, you have to build the infrastructure to get them higher than any truck would go."

Del Duca added that solar panels would need much deeper anchoring in the parking lot to avert damage from cars - something, he says, that presents its own safety hazard for drivers and pedestrians, whose space would be reduced. And that's another reason that retailers wouldn't warm to the idea. He noted that solar panels have already been installed on every practical rooftop spot in the complex.

Homeowners see the potential takeover of park land as another broken promise. The housing units were age-restricted until the developer took advantage of state law revisions and opened them up to market-rate levels.
Del Duca contended that regardless of its label, the site is still a dump beneath the surface, and remains of marginal value for any sort of open space or recreation purposes. Moreover, he said, it was a liability to the township's finances and the health of Barnegat Bay until former Mayor Carl Block's administration organized the deal that brought the Walters Group in to develop the site.

Stafford was under state orders to close and cap the landfill at the start of the decade. Block's administrators estimated the cost to be as high as $60,000,000. "We bore that cost," Del Duca said. "We closed and capped the landfill, and now we created an ability to put solar panels and other renewable facilities on top of the landfill."

Theresa Lettman of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance considered the turnout sparse and admonished township officials and developers to raise awareness in the township. The Walters Group is prepared to start the project upon approval, but Lettman says that final decisions are still some distance away.

"If they need 30 days before the scoping hearing, and 30 days before a public hearing, that's 60 days," said Lettman, "and if it has to be 75 days before it can go before the Statehouse Commission, that definitely means 'til next year."

PPA is staging a citizens' rally and information session about the project on October 6 at the Holiday Inn, Route 72 in Manawkin. It starts at 6:30 PM.

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