

CURRENTS

Group Sponsoring Rally, Info Session About Solar Panels

PPA Sets Sights on Stafford and Walters Group

The Pinelands Preservation Alliance announced on Monday that it is sponsoring a "Citizens Rally and Information Session" about Stafford Township's decision to allow the Walters Group, a Barnegat-based developer, to build a solar panel project on top of the closed and capped Stafford Township Landfill, adjacent to the sprawling Stafford Park complex.

The rally is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 6, at the Holiday Inn at 151 Route 72 East in Manahawkin.

"Stafford Township recently passed a resolution to allow the Stafford Landfill to have a large solar energy facility built on top," wrote Pinelands Preservation Alliance Executive Director Carleton Montgomery in a press release disclosing his organization's plans. "The landfill was officially closed through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) which allowed the town to sell most of the Stafford Business Park to the developer Walters Homes, in exchange for the developer paying for the landfill closure.

"Pinelands Preservation Alliance has no objection to the construction of solar panels on landfills in Regional Growth Areas of the Pinelands, but in this case the deed restriction precludes the landfill from being converted to commercial use because it has been dedicated to open space in a natural condition and permanently protected as open space.

"Now Walters Homes wants to develop the landfill and the resolution Stafford passed contradicts the open space deed restriction which the town itself placed on the landfill. This is bad policy and a broken promise."

Some Stafford residents might wonder why an environmental group would oppose the solar energy project. After all, it would produce a revenue stream for the township (at a yet-to-be-determined rate) and provide green energy. And it would be built over a capped landfill, not a pristine patch of natural Pinelands.

The PPA says the land over the capped landfill is not a wasteland but has already become a "grassland habitat."

In order to divert this protected open space, said Montgomery, public hearings will be held to satisfy the N.J. Department of Environment Protection's Green Acres rules and the Pinelands Commission MOA process. The PPA would like to see good public turnouts at any and all such hearings and is using the rally/info session to fill residents in on the issues and process.

PPA representatives have already publicly announced their intention to push for compensation in case the solar project is allowed to come to

fruition. The group says Green Acres rules require that any protected land diverted for private, "for profit" use be compensated for at a 4-to-1 ratio. Considering the proposed Walters Group project would cover some 30 acres, the PPA would likely be pushing for Walters to purchase about 120 acres of open space if the developer insists on going ahead with its plans.

"What do you think?" asked Montgomery in the press release. "What should Stafford residents get in return for any Green Acres diversion that might occur? What should Stafford's pinelands environment get in return for the loss of this grassland habitat? Where should comments be sent?"

The rally is occurring a little late to prepare the public and, thusly, the PPA for the first DEP Green Acres public hearing regarding the issue. It is scheduled for 6 p.m. on Monday, Sept. 27, at the Stafford Township Municipal Building at 260 East Bay Ave. in Manahawkin. But there probably will be plenty of future public hearings about the subject.

For more information, visit the PPA web site at pinelandsalliance.org or call the PPA's Theresa Lettman at 609-859-8860, extension 22

— Rick Mellerup
rickmellerup@thesandpaper.net