

Residents, environmental groups oppose plan for solar arrays at Stafford Business Park

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By ROB SPAHR Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, September 27, 2010

STAFFORD TOWNSHIP - A plan to build a solar farm on the site of the township's former landfill came under fire Monday night during a public hearing on the release of the conservation restrictions for the site.

The Barnegat Township-based Walters Group is proposing to build a 1,026-array solar farm on about 30 acres of the 70-plus acres that were set aside for open space on the site when the Walters Group agreed to help pay to cap that landfill in return for getting to build the massive Stafford Business Park and receive associated tax abatements.

But residents and environmentalist argued Monday night that the plan for the solar farm subverts the memorandum of agreement, or MOA, the Walters Group and the township struck with the New Jersey Pinelands Commission that allowed the business park to be built but set aside most of the landfill itself as permanently protected open space.

And most of the opposition claimed that the Township Committee is preparing to breach that agreement without providing the public proper notice, access to documents or appropriate compensation.

"We were promised transparency by (Mayor John McMenamin and his running mates on the Township Committee) but many residents see this as an ambush," said township resident Sal Sorce, who also blasted the plan as "misleading" and "fundamentally dishonest."

Sorce called the plan the current administration's second recent violation of public trust in recent months involving the business park, following the lifting of the "age-restricted" requirements for planned housing units on the property.

And Theresa Lettman, director for monitoring programs for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, said township officials have repeatedly failed to provide documents related to the project, did not mark the proposed site with the required amount of signage and are not planning to adhere to laws that mandate public review periods of such projects.

"You may be in a hurry. You may be in a rush, but we want to make sure the public has every single day to review (the proposal) that they are afforded under the rules," she said.

Other residents, such as Louis F. Castelli, tried to make sure the Township Committee was looking out for the taxpayers' interests more than the private interests of the developer.

"I understand that the lessee may incur a substantial risk with respect to its investment, but the lessee also stands to garner a reasonable rate of return with upward financial opportunity," said Castelli, adding taxpayers should be entitled to - and benefit from - an annual financial lease payment that is fair. "It should not be the policy or practice of Stafford Township to have its taxpayers assume any of this risk, and the mayor and council should refrain from any action or ordinance that mitigates this risk to the detriment of the citizens and taxpayers."

Emile DeVito, of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, said officials should be prepared to appropriately reimburse the residents of New Jersey at least \$3 million or acquire the mandatory amount of open space - 4 acres for every acre taken - in order to offset the loss of the open space taken for the solar farm.

DeVito said the initial phases of the Stafford Business Park's development were approved by the state Pinelands Commission only because of the promise that the land would be preserved.

"Now, just two years later, you're asking to undo the MOA because you've found a way to make money off the land," DeVito said. "It doesn't matter what this land used to be. It doesn't matter that it was a landfill. It is a park now - a park for people and a park for the wildlife that lives there."

Walters Group officials said they plan to address the concerns of residents at a Planning Board meeting Oct. 6, coincidentally the same night the Pinelands Preservation Alliance is planning to rally against the project at the Holiday Inn on Route 72.

If you want to comment

Written comments on the proposal will be accepted until Oct. 11. Mail or drop off proposals to: Administrator Jim Moran, Stafford Township Municipal Building, 260 E. Bay Ave., Stafford Township, NJ 08050 and/or Department of Environmental Protection, Green Acres Program, Bureau of Legal Services and Stewardship Mail Code 501-01, P.O. Box 420, Trenton, NJ 08625-0420

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