

Green Groups Putting Heat On Solar Plan

Say Open Space 'More Important'

By RICK MELLERUP

It would seem that environmentalists would be in favor of solar energy, especially when that energy would be produced by installing panels over an old, capped landfill. But not when the landfill in question is the old Stafford Township Landfill; not when the plan is being proposed as part of the Stafford Park project at the site of the old Stafford Township Business Park.

Word leaked out that the Barnegat-based Walters Group, the developer of Stafford Park, and Stafford Township had met with the Pinelands Commission to introduce yet another amendment (there have already been five) to the memorandum of agreement signed among those three entities, the memorandum that governs what may and may not be built at the sprawling site. Walters and Stafford were seeking to install solar panels over the old landfill in an effort to make the development energy self-sufficient. A good goal, probably all would agree. But with solar panels, the words location, location, location are as important as they are in real estate.

Theresa Lettman, director for Monitoring Programs for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, showed up at the Aug. 3 meeting of the Stafford Township Council to speak on the issue in no uncertain terms. The PPA, she said, and other environmental groups such as the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, hadn't been thrilled a few years ago when the original MOA had been drafted and the space on top of the old landfill had been accepted toward meeting the agreement's open-space requirements.

"That sounds ridiculous," she told Mayor John McMenamin and his council, "but as much as we didn't like it, we certainly don't like the fact that in three short years you are trying to take it away."

Solar energy is important, but so is wildlife.

"The environment and habitat (at the landfill) has just begun to return to the state it was in prior to the capping of the landfill," she continued, adding that the fencing that surrounded the project to keep threatened and endangered snakes out of the area was scheduled to be removed this autumn. Yet, already, the Walters Group and Stafford were thinking of toying with the original plan.

Lettman was there to issue a warning.

"If you move ahead, we will assert that this is a diversion of open space,"

she said.

Under Green Acres guidelines, she added, when deed-restricted open space is diverted for for-profit purposes, the developer must mitigate by purchasing other open space at a 4-to-1 ratio, "four acres for every acre you want to take." That's what the PPA would be pushing for if Walters and Stafford persist in their plan.

"We wanted to let you know early in the process," said Lettman, who, after her remarks were concluded, finished with a Terminator-like "I'll be back."

Margit Meissner-Jackson, the Ocean County Sierra Club Conservation chairwoman, said the township had filed a conservation easement with the Ocean County Clerk's Office regarding the landfill, officially declaring that it "shall remain undeveloped and open space in perpetuity." "That means forever," she reminded the council.

Meissner-Jackson said solar panels aren't always as innocent as they seem. She had installed them on her own property and had learned the steel support posts had to be driven 20 feet

into the ground.

"That means now you are going through the cap into the landfill and disturbing it," she said. "If you do that, you'll no doubt have rainwater and stormwater runoff off of the solar panels going into the area that was supposed to be protected," Mill Creek and groundwater.

24,624 Panels Called For

It is important to realize the solar array being considered isn't just a couple of panels on a rooftop. A "summary report" concerning the solar project was completed by Speitel and Speitel Inc. of Gibbsboro on

July 15. The report says that in order to generate six megawatts of power, 24,624 panels would be required.

"The proposed solar field fence will enclose approximately 30 acres," the report reads. "The capped portion of the landfill is approximately 95 percent of the fenced solar field area. The panels have a total horizontal projection of 9.24 acres."

The panels are just the beginning.

"Electrical transformers will be pad-mounted outside the limit of the landfill. The two transformer locations will occupy an additional 0.08 acres. Both transformer locations

are also fenced. Ground(ing) will be performed outside of the limits of the landfill cap."

Then there is the matter of transmission lines.

"There are two transmission lines proposed with the solar power system. The first line carries power to the (Ocean) County facilities on Block 25 Lot 37 and Haywood Road. No natural vegetation is proposed to be removed to supply power to the County. The transmission lines would run overhead to the southwest corner of lot 37 and then underground along the existing fence line to the County buildings.

"The second transmission line runs from the transformers on the southerly side of the landfill to the existing commercial portion of Stafford Park. The majority of this transmission line is currently wooded. The route generally follows the common property line with the State Forest. The clearing limit for this transmission line has been held 10 feet away from the property line to prevent any disturbance of the State Forest.

"The transmission line also bends around the wetlands buffer on Block 25 Lot 34.02. Clearing of trees is required on lots 34.02, 39 and 40 for the transmission line. The width of the clearing is proposed to be 40 feet."

The report minimizes any threat to the environment posed by the project. If 4.5 acres of clear cutting sounds severe, the report says it would have to be done anyway:

"Most of the area along the route of the transmission lines will be part of the fire break required for the construction of residential uses on lot 34.02.

"Once the transmission lines are constructed, the exposed areas will be seeded with Pinelands grasses. No access roads will remain open once construction has been completed."

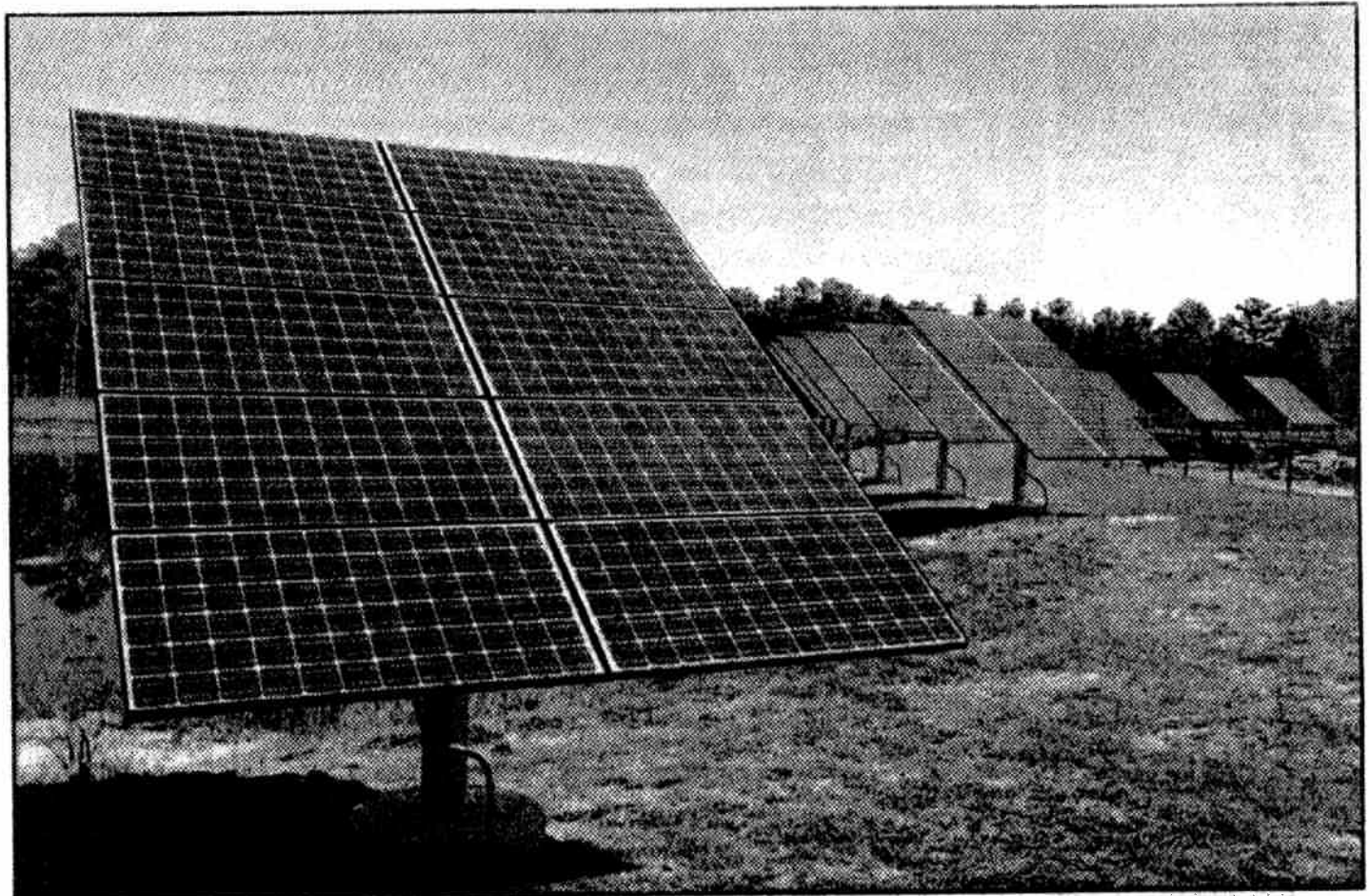
The report also dismissed Meissner-Jackson's concerns in advance:

"The construction of a solar energy system on the top of a capped landfill requires that the design and construction be sensitive to the impermeable landfill cap. In order to safely install the solar systems, no penetrations or excavations are proposed on the landfill cap. All proposed elements of the solar system above the landfill cap are designed to be placed on the existing cover material or within four inches of

the existing surface."

That may sound soothing to the general public. Don't expect, however, that environmental activists will be lulled one bit. ♦

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File Photo by Ryan Morrill

SMALL POTATOES: A proposed solar farm on top of the capped Stafford Township landfill would dwarf the current layout at the Ocean County recycling facility, since the new plan calls for 24,624 new panels.