Times Herald

NEWS

Solar project may help Fort Gratiot farmers diversify income, keep land in the family

Jackie Smith
Port Huron Times Herald

Published 2:04 p.m. ET Nov. 7, 2023

Over the last several weeks, plenty of residents in Fort Gratiot have voiced concerns over a 900-acre solar development proposed in the township — their names etched in petitions, anti-solar signs placed on lawns, and crowds converging at local meetings.

But just a few days prior to a rescheduled planning commission meeting on Wednesday night, a few Fort Gratiot landowners who have opted to add their own property to the potential utility development, dubbed Portside Solar, said there are a few things they hope their neighbors will understand.

“We were full of questions, and at the beginning, we were very hesitant to sign up, and we did not sign up at the beginning,” Charlie Lewis said in an interview late last week.

Lewis is one of five property owners with 17 parcels listed to be included in the project from Chicago-based Ranger Power, whose plans also include Clyde Township. They’ve been in contact with the company over the last two or three years, and sometime after a Ranger representative stopped by to talk to them, he said they came to a new conclusion.

With 215 acres included, and in addition to supplementing their income, Lewis said it could potentially help maintain a historic homestead that’s been in the family since 1876 for decades.

“We originally agreed to let them run some underground wires through our farmland to connect up to different parts of the solar project, and then, as we got more comfortable with them, we decided that we would sign up some farmland with them to be able to build,” Lewis said.

“We decided that number one, they were going to pay a good rent, and number two, that it gave us a way to diversify the income that we were getting for the farm,” the 46-year-old added. “Because farming is a feast-or-famine-type industry. So, I would have some constant income coming from the ground that I could count on. Then, three, there was going to be nothing bad done to the ground. And in 40 years, when the lease is done, I’ll probably be dead, but my son and my daughter will be able to get the land back in pristine condition. They can farm it and do what they like with it.”

During Wednesday’s Fort Gratiot meeting, slated for 6 p.m. at the Blue Water Convention Center, 800 Harker St., in Port Huron, planning commissioners will consider a special land use request and site plans from Ranger Power.

In the township, Portside Solar’s plans encompass a large swatch off Brace, Carrigan, Cole, Metcalf, and State roads. Actual solar panels would be sited within a fenced-in area over roughly 527 acres of more than the 900 acres listed in Fort Gratiot, with four of the participating parcels containing proposed underground collection lines.

A collection of materials on the project have been posted under meetings and agendas at https://fortgratiot.us.

Another set of appendices have been submitted with special use and site plan applications to Clyde Township, where Ranger Power proposes locating a substation and other amenities for the project over another 275 acres. Clyde’s planning commission is slated to discuss plans Nov. 16.

The combined project would have a 100-megawatt capacity generated — 75 in Fort Gratiot and 25 in Clyde. This week, project manager Toby Valentino said, “The power that will be produced by Portside Solar is actively being marketed to Michigan utilities. The power produced by Portside will be sold to a Michigan power purchaser.”

Weighing the benefits of solar on historically family farms

For Ted and Cindy Furness, Ranger Power is the second renewable energy that’s approached them.

The first was out of California seven years ago. A church-going family, Cindy Furness said they prayed about it, and when nothing came to pass, “figured, ‘That’s it.’” Later on, they

were approached by another fellow from Ranger Power, and Cindy said she had a good feeling about him, later doing her own research on the company.

“We got a call from another guy, and he showed up at the door. A really nice young man. That’s important to us. A very strong Christian man,” she said by phone Monday. “We’ve dealt with different companies, with other types of things, like the road commission. We had some electrical (workers), you’ve got different contractors, and there’s some of them that can be on your property working and they’re cussing and they’re swearing, and they’re leaving cigarette butts all over your yard. And you just don’t want to deal with people like that. Well, this young fellow who stopped by, there was such a light about him.”

Now, nearing retirement age and looking for an exit plan, Cindy Furness said they, too, were interested in an income that mean they didn’t have to sell their property.

They have more than 250 acres listed in the Fort Gratiot portion of Portside Solar’s plans. Married for 41 years, Cindy said she’s lived there for decades, while the land itself has been in the Furness family since 1892.

“How far it’ll go, I don’t know. We’re at the point that we feel if it’s in God’s hands, it’ll happen, and if it’s not, we will look for other alternatives,” she said. “We’re not going to be farming that much longer. A lot of people are crying, ‘Oh, they’re going to lose the farmland.’ Well, we can’t sell to another farmer and try to make it for retirement. I have not worked outside the farm or outside the home since my kids were little. We’re a one-income family.”

Both Furness and Lewis, two of the three largest acreage holders slated to participate, said those long-term family ties were also a motivator. “My kids are in their late ‘30s. They could retire,” Furness said.

At Lewis’ property off North Road, on the edge of Fort Gratiot and Clyde, the family’s two kids are much younger, at ages 7 and 10.

Some of the sugar beet acreage in Clyde, Lewis said, would be impacted by the solar project, but plenty would be left available for them to farm.

Overall, they have 900 cattle — working with animals, Lewis said, is what he enjoys the most — as well as 1,500 acres of ground to farm sugar beets, corn, soybeans, and wheat with property in Fort Gratiot, Clyde, and Grant Township.

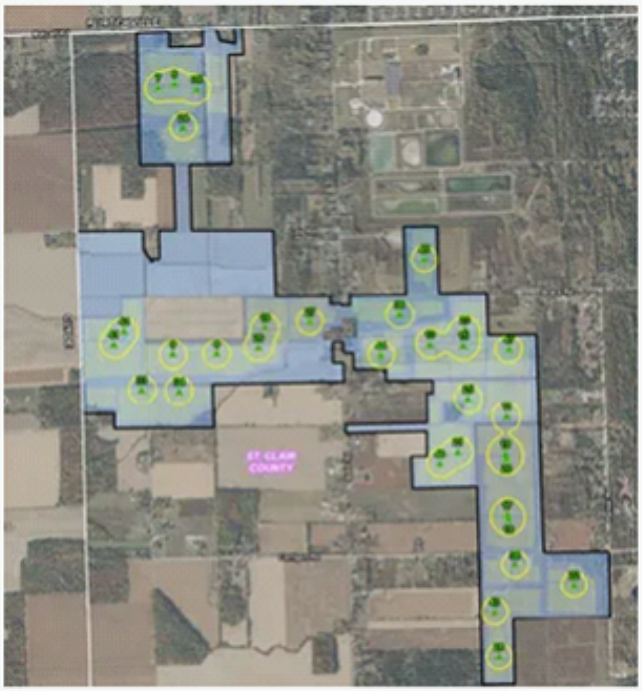
“It’s my property, and I should be able to do what I want with it. These people that are protesting, I fully believe that if they had a chance to subdivide or put up a bunch of houses

on their property, they would not ask me if I thought it was OK," Lewis said, adding, "I feel totally comfortable, and I think that my ancestors will be happy that we're doing this."

Contact Jackie Smith at (810) 989-6270 or jssmith@gannett.com.

Charlie Lewis holds a sugar beet on Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023, on acreage in Clyde Township that Lewis Farms has listed to participate in a massive solar development between the township and Fort Gratiot. Included in the latter, Lewis Farms has over 200 acres. *Jackie Smith/Times Herald*

St. Clair County farmer Charlie Lewis points to his ancestor Charles Lewis, who though he is fifth-generation on their North Street-based property, he is not named after. Lewis said his family's homestead, and where they currently farm, was established in 1876. *Jackie Smith/Times Herald*



Site plans show Range Power's plans, under Portside Solar, LLC, to construct a 917-acre solar panel development across 17 properties along Metcalf, Cole, Carrigan, State, and Brace roads, in Fort Gratiot. *Provided By Fort Gratiot*

Charlie Lewis, wife Gwyn, 10-year-old daughter Lorelei, and 7-year-old son Edwyn stand beside the children's 4-H steers on Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023, at the family farm in North Street. This year marks the first time Lorelei and Edwyn are raising steer for 4-H. *Jackie Smith/Times Herald*

Lewis Farms has over 200 acres included in the Fort Gratiot 900-acre solar project that's up for consideration. However, the project, dubbed Portside Solar, also covers acreage in neighboring Clyde Township, as pictured on Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023, that farms sugar beets, as well. *Jackie Smith/Times Herald*