Board fi□elds questions over solar project

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The Chicago-based developer proposing a 917-acre solar project in Fort Gratiot fi□elded questions from St. Clair County commissioners and residents late Thursday — more than two weeks ahead of a township-level meeting rescheduled for local permit and site plan approval.

Residents with concerns about the potential development from Ranger Power spoke for much of the hourlong public comment session before the county's board of commissioners.

Early on, many disagreed with County Board Chairman Jeff□ Bohm's assertion that some concerns about ordinances and individual projects are decisions left up to local township-level boards versus being a county-controlled issue. However, multiple county board members, too, asked questions about the toxicity of materials used in utilityscale renewable energy developments, how solar panels are decommissioned following their decadeslong lifecycles, and if or how the county- owned landfi□ll will manage those materials.

The project itself, dubbed Portside Solar, proposes a setup producing up to 100-megawatts on 17 large parcels along agricultural and wooded property off□ of Metcalf, Cole, Carrigan, State, and Brace roads in Fort Gratiot.

County Board Vice Chairperson Jorja Baldwin, whose district includes Fort Gratiot and who consults with the township on zoning development, said on Thursday that four parcels within the total acreage weren't proposed to host panels at all, adding commissioners were "starting to get into the weeds" of what local planning commissioners at the township level will decide.

Plans have been submitted to both Fort Gratiot and Clyde townships, as a

substation is proposed nearby in the latter.

Fort Gratiot's planning commission is set to consider a special use permit and site plans for the larger portion of the project at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 8, at the Blue Water Convention Center, 800 Harker St., in Port Huron. That was rescheduled from an Oct. 10 meeting unable to accommodate the massive crowd in attendance over Ranger Power's plans.

On Thursday, project manager Toby Valentino addressed many of the questions from commissioners and residents, adding they wanted to be a resource and answer questions about applications submitted to both townships "to show we have a commitment to being part of this community."

More information could be found under board and commissions at https:// fortgratiot.us or https://portsidesolar.com.

Are Portside Solar's materials toxic?

"There are no toxic materials in the panels that we're proposing," Valentino told county commissioners. "They're steel I-beams in the ground. There's no concrete at the bottom of those. There's racking that goes on top of that and panels made of glass, aluminum, polysilicate, et cetera. That's the short answer."

Commissioner Dave Rushing, whose own district around Riley and Wales townships has experienced concerns about renewable energy developments, pushed back on whether those materials at any stage included heavy metals, which he considered hazardous.

“I’m not aware in the ones that we’re proposing, no,” Valentino said.

Rushing replied, “I’m concerned about St. Clair County and the potential hazardous waste, and if there’s heavy metals involved in any of the manufacturing, no matter how minor it is, that will not be allowed in our landfill. We are a closed county, which means everything that is in this county has to go to our landfill.”

Bohm asked Matt Williams, who manages the county’s landfill, whether hazardous materials could even be accepted, despite St. Clair County’s closed status.

There are plenty of regulations that go into identifying materials as hazardous or non-hazardous, Williams said, though his bigger question was about capacity.

“It probably bears additional consideration because in Fort Gratiot and Burtchville, there are continually more and more permits for residential solar panels on their rooftops,” Baldwin said. “I think we’d run into the same thing.”

“I’m not an expert in solar panels. I’m not well-versed. My understanding was they’re generally classified as hazardous waste. However, the technologies are constantly changing, so they’re getting cheaper. They may very well be getting better,” Williams replied. “With respect to residential versus commercial, residential units are typically exempt from hazardous materials. So, a homeowner’s (materials), whether they’re hazardous or not, we would take them in because it’s a smaller volume.”

Could the county landfill handle commerical solar waste?

Rushing also pushed on the volume of Portside Solar’s waste materials once panels were decommissioned in 20 to 25 years.

Some residents asked the impact long-term on wildlife, agricultural land, and the water supply, particularly for those on well water. Valentino said their panels would be “very easily” decommissioned and that their plans included details to help maintain the environment, pollinator habitats as to not overly impact wildlife, and addressing water runoff.

“And just to be clear, these panels are not hazardous waste by any means. And that’s well-documented,” he reiterated.

“There are comparisons to housing. There are comparisons to natural gas plants,' Valentino said. “No house or natural gas plant is going leave that land fallow, regenerating, being able to go back to an agricultural use where you could do a crop rotation.”

Once solar panels are decommissioned, Valentino said it was “hard to say” how much scrap there would be.

Their impact is less, officials said, compared to coal plants. Bohm cited the “mountain”-high coal ash piles surrounding old DTE Energy power plants, adding they’re bigger than the county’s landfill.

Still, Williams said the question about volume from old solar projects was a valid one.

“I think that’s kind of hard for them to define. We do have a lot of room left. But 25 years from now, we’re going to have less room left,” he said. “So, that’s what I look at. Can I accept it and can I not? If I’m able to accept it by regulatory (standards), we’ll take it and we’ll manage it. … We’re talking about likely 25, 30 years in the future and would potentially getting pretty close to our end-of-site life by that time.”

“I still cannot believe that you would not recycle things like that with the metals,” Bohm said.

Citing a source outside Ranger Power and another solar site, Baldwin chimed in, “The panels that they’ve been using are glass, copper, and aluminum. So, there is scrap and salvage in the copper and aluminum. … The glass is what is tougher to recycle because there’s not a market for it.”

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Residents watch on during a St. Clair County Board of Commissioners meeting on Thursday. Many of them spoke about solar project concerns in an hour-long public comment session. JACKIE SMITH/TIMES HERALD.

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