PROPOSED SOLAR PROJECT

Resident Sarah Beebe looks over her backyard off Carrigan Road in Fort Gratiot on Thursday. She move there four years ago to enjoy the quiet nature in the northern end of the township. Like many others, she had concerns about a nearby proposed solar project. PHOTOS BY JACKIE SMITH/TIMES HERALD

Questions raised

Ahead of Nov. 8, Fort Gratiot, residents seek answers about a 900-acre solar project

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Port Huron Times Herald
USA TODAY NETWORK – MICHIGAN

Driving a four-wheeler along a grassy green, manicured path early Thursday night, Fort Gratiot resident Dick West said his family uses much of the acreage behind their home on State Road for recreation.

His wife Angie's grandparents picked up 53 acres there in the early 1960s, leaving Port Huron when the city put fluoride in the water, and they've long-maintained two generational residences there.

They have a fishpond once installed outback by the state that's still stocked, and just this past summer, a few of the remaining trees from a small orchard were taken out by the wind in a storm. Then, next door, with no perimeter trees or fencing separating it from sight, a church and farm property at the edge of a field sometimes glows when it catches light at sunset.

"Your picture won't do it justice — you see right there. Just look at that. The farm, the silos," West told the Times Herald early Thursday evening, stopping the four-wheeler briefly along the property line. "I've come back here and had the sun shining on it in the evening, and when the trees are all colorful, and I go home and I look at it, I'm like, 'Wow, that's not what it looked like' (in person)."

But the Wests aren't sure how their picturesque surroundings will be impacted by an industrial solar development proposed by Chicago-based Ranger Power.

Several ducks and a steer named Johnny Cash hang out in the small field behind Sarah Beebe's home on Carrigan Road in Fort Gratiot on Thursday.

Site plans submitted to Fort Gratiot's township office earlier this year encompass a massive 900-acre footprint along 17 parcels off Brace,

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Carrigan, Cole, Metcalf, and State roads, including immediately north of Dick and Angie West's family property.

The project, dubbed Portside Solar, proposed a setup producing up to 100 megawatts, 75 of which would be in Fort Gratiot and 25 in Clyde Township.

Now, ahead of a rescheduled Fort Gratiot Planning Commission meeting on Nov. 8, residents have raised a host of concerns — often over long-term unknowns they fear could negatively impact their community.

"We have two children. We have six grandchildren. That is what my grandmother wanted this property for was to stay the way it was for family," Angie West said Thursday, while seated inside at their dining room table. "So, I'm worried about what's going to happen in 20 years, however long they've commissioned this for. Then, what? ... What's going to happen with all those panels?"

Project manager looks to clear up 'misconceptions'

A special use permit for Ranger Power and site plans will be considered at Fort Gratiot's next planning commission meeting, slated for 6 p.m. Nov. 8 at the Blue Water Convention Center, 800 Harker St., in Port Huron.

Petitions in opposition of solar have been submitted to the township this fall.

But Toby Valentino, project manager for the Portside Solar development, has said they want to be available to residents with questions, and in an email Friday, he looked to clear up what he called "common misconceptions" about their proposal.

The first was that not every parcel within the 900 acres will be impacted by solar panels.

Those have been sited within a fenced-in area of only roughly 527 acres, Valentino said, with four of the participating parcels contained in the proposal slated to contain a proposed underground collection line.

Five of the landowners participating in Fort Gratiot are still active farmers in St. Clair County, he said.

The project manager additionally said the solar ordinances Ranger Power must work around in both Fort Gratiot and Clyde Township, where a substation is proposed, entailed "stringent requirements" that address "many concerns including glare, sound, setbacks, screening, aesthetics, decommissioning, and more."

For more information, visit https://portsidesolar.com or the planning commission's minutes and agendas at https://fortgratiot.us. Documents made available online include in-depth site plans, correspondence to the township, petitions and a property value impact report.

Many of residents' concerns are environmental

For other residents, whose properties don't abut the Portside footprint but are nearby, many of the concerns are environmental.

Sarah Beebe lives down the road on Carrigan at a home, where she's been for four years and has begun hobby farming in her backyard. There, she has chickens and ducks, as well as a lamb she calls Lamb Lamb and a black-colored steer she named Johnny Cash.

The proximity of industrial solar, she said, makes her nervous.

"If something were to catch on fire, we do not have fire hydrants on (this area of) Carrigan," Beebe said. "... Fire departments would have to bring in a water tanker in order to put out any fires or deal with anything like that."

Both Beebe and the Wests were concerned about other environmental factors, too, such as the impact on their well water.

"Anything that goes in the soil near us, we're screwed," Beebe said with a cow mug in hand Thursday.

Valentino has maintained solar panels are safe.

"There are no liquid components of panels and no risk of any unsafe impacts from panels on groundwater," he said via email. "We have performed water runoff testing at our Assembly Solar project in Shiawassee County, Michigan, which concluded that the project had no impact on stormwater runoff collected from the panels.

"There are no components of panels that would impact the safety of groundwater or soil health. Solar projects do not require the use of large quantities of fertilizer and pesticides that are commonly used for traditional crop planting. Panels are made almost entirely of glass and aluminum."

Some residents have been in support of Ranger Power's plans, citing environmental reasons. Two submitted written comments to the township prior to a commission hearing originally planned for Oct. 10.

Dick West and Beebe also emailed the township.

Beebe said she understood the progress supporters often wanted to see with solar energy but questioned how something more unnatural could affect the nature she moved to Fort Gratiot to enjoy.

"And I feel like something like that, of that proportion to come out here, it's like they've already got their foot in the door," she said. "So, what's (the) next (thing) we bring in?"

Angie West also wondered what the development would do to wildlife, adding, "The grandkids were standing out there for the bus the other morning, and there was a deer right out in this field. Does it drive it away?" Still, the couple said they wanted to hear Ranger Power out and planned to be there Nov. 8.

"They deserve the opportunity to tell their side of the story," Dick West said.

"I want to hear what their plan is, their projection, what the scope of where they're going to put it, and how are they going to access it," his wife added. "And I want them to be able to do that without the mob mentality of just people being upset."

Fort Gratiot resident Dick West looks out over the property behind his family's residence along State Road on Thursday. He and wife, Angie, had several concerns over how a massive solar development proposed nearby would impact the environment, which their family enjoys recreationally.
JACKIE SMITH/TIMES HERALD

Solar nosie a concern for other residents

Some of the upset residents shared — leaving a crowd of swelling attendance at the Oct. 10 township meeting and many at the St. Clair County board meeting on Oct. 19 — have had to do more with public notice of the solar proposal.

The increasing awareness among some residents, however, has also led them to their own research, often sharing findings on social media and referencing Ranger's Shiawassee project in open meetings.

"Drive down M-13. See how ugly these solar fields are," resident Vance Richardson told county commissioners earlier this month. "... I tell you, I drove down a quarter mile, turned left, I could hear this high-pitched whining noise."

Richardson lives along Cole Road near the Portside Solar footprint, though not close to an area proposed for solar panels, and multiple family members have been outspoken about their concerns. By phone on Friday, Valentino said the sound emitted from developments comes from one piece of equipment, and he didn't expect it to impact Fort Gratiot or Clyde residents.

"One of the things we're doing with this project that was not a requirement of that (Shiawassee) project is to set back inverters 350 feet from all residences, which if you've ever driven by Assembly, you could and know that's much more room than you need," he said. "But again, citing back to the Fort Gratiot and Clyde Township ordinances, they both require a dBA (A-weighted decibels) level at the property boundary or residence that is equivalent to ambient."

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