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Augusta County should give thumbs up to first large solar project

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People dislike change. However, for better or worse, change happens. It is up to us to figure out how to make change a positive force.

Rapidly hurtling toward us is the creation of large-scale solar projects. These massive projects that swallow up hundreds of acres of land also produce clean energy that is sent into the grid and returns to power our lives.

Like any change, there are pros and cons. Not all utility scale solar projects are equal.

Good planning and responsible developers are necessary to ensure that our vision of the county protects our beautiful landscape and precious resources such as water and air, and the communities that we hold so dear. Solar projects do not produce air, noise, or light pollution or contribute to sprawl and congestion, but they are often criticized for impacting viewsheds and taking viable farmland out of production.

With that in mind, we would like you to consider the Round Hill Solar Project currently under review in Augusta County. If built, the 860-acre project would be located in the Mint Spring-Stuarts Draft area.

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Solar photovoltaic panels require a lot of space. Experts say between 5 and 10 acres per megawatt. Arguably, the best place for solar panels is on rooftops, industrial lands, brownfields, degraded land, areas slated to be paved over, and marginal farmland. Clearing large swaths of mature forests for solar panels is usually not a good choice nor is the use of prime farmland soil in many places.

The Round Hill Solar Project is predominately on marginal farmland, which makes it a good place for utility scale solar. Over 600 acres (72.31%) of the proposed site is class III soil or higher. USDA

considers class III and above as having “severe limitations and requires special conservation measures to produce crops.”

The land may lay well and look pretty, but the soil is highly erosive.

Twenty-nine percent of the soil is in the Chilhowie series, which is one of the most erosive soils in the Valley. It is born from shale and does not have a strong ability to cling to other soil particles. Therefore, when it rains it can easily wash away into nearby streams.

The Round Hill project presents the opportunity to do something better for these parcels of land. Almost all of the crop fields in the proposed solar project are designated as “highly erodible” by USDA and would qualify for the nation’s largest conservation program on private land — the Conservation Reserve Program. If these fields were in the program they would be retired from annual crop production and planted to various perennial, wildlife-friendly plants.

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Planting perennial, wildlife-friendly, soil enriching vegetation is exactly what the Round Hill solar project is going to do with the addition of photovoltaic panels that will produce 83 megawatts of power, enough to supply 14,000 homes with clean renewable energy.

The reality is that large-scale solar arrays also represent tax revenue that is at least 10 times higher in the county coffers than if this land remained in agriculture and that revenue comes without the subsequent service needs (such as schools and emergency services) that other types of development necessitate. The land goes out of land use, which represents a huge revenue increase for the county.

This project will produce over \$6 million in direct revenues to the county over its life, via siting agreements, revenue sharing, and tax payments. This benefits Augusta County citizens directly by diversifying the county’s tax base, providing substantial new tax revenues, and thus helping to keep tax rates lower in the county in the future.

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Projects such as this also provide a 35-year pressure relief valve to haphazard development that comes over time. That development, allowed by right on that same land, increases taxes and traffic congestion, impacts views and also takes land out of farming.

Some call these massive projects, solar “farms” – a designation that rankles many in the farming community. However, this land will still be harvesting the sun to produce clean energy, food for wildlife, clean water, and clean air.

Whether or not actual farming takes place on these large-scale projects, an income stream helps farms remain viable and, unlike with other types of development, land is not being permanently removed from agricultural production.

The Round Hill project has a decommissioning plan, as is required by the county, and in 35 years, that land can revert back to traditional farming because it has been protected. We would suggest that Augusta County is ready to give a thumbs up to its first large scale solar project.

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