

# news leader.

**COLUMNISTS | Opinion** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

## Columnist: Solar Farm is good for the city

**Bobby Whitescarver** Special to The News Leader

Published 9:21 p.m. ET June 1, 2023

“I’m not against solar power, but . . . ,” citizens repeated at the recent public hearing held by Staunton City Council on the proposed solar farm to be located off Commerce Road. I wrung my hands and shook my head as I listened to folks that came to speak against the proposal.

Twelve people spoke against the project, and nine spoke in favor.

Here’s what’s proposed: The new owners of what is now a grazing farm for cattle want to construct a solar farm to generate 20.75 megawatts of electricity on 98 acres of land. The planners and engineers of the project have worked with city staff and citizens for over a year to develop a model for how to do solar right.

This project exceeds all the requirements for proper siting of utility-scale solar from the American Planning Association, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and the Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley.

The owners will transform the land from nonnative pasture to pollinator-friendly, native plants under and around the solar panels. Riparian buffers will be established along all water features. Trees and shrubs will be planted along the property’s border for screening. Erosion and sediment controls and stormwater runoff basins will exceed state standards. By law, stormwater runoff cannot exceed the rate of the current land use. The owners have agreed to put up a bond to fund the decommissioning of the solar farm at the end of its life, recycle what they can, and put it back in pasture as it is now.

Opponents expressed two main complaints at the public hearing: Solar panels would ruin their view and they hadn’t been made aware of the project.

I’ve been to many public hearings about solar farms, and ruining neighbors’ views is the number one reason people fight them. This should be a nonissue because the land under question is not

theirs. I am unaware of any program that pays landowners to preserve the view for others to look at. Also, some people think solar panels are beautiful, especially with pollinator-friendly, native plants under and around them.

People didn't know about it? This project has been in the planning stages for over a year. The owners have held two public meetings; the Planning Commission held a public hearing advertised in the paper and open to the public; the entire proposal package is on the city's website for anyone to read or download.

Another concern expressed at the hearing was that the owner of the land has no experience installing a solar farm. This is true, but the project's design, planning, and engineering firm, Timmons Group, has been involved with over a hundred solar farms throughout Virginia and the rest of the country. It has been a well-respected firm since 1953.

And here's the kicker. Although the land is currently in agricultural use, it is zoned light industrial. That means that by right, it could be converted to a junkyard, a truck terminal, or a site for other industrial services—without any public hearings or input from neighbors.

The world is in a wonderful, frustrating, epic transition from fossil fuel energy generation to renewable energy. In a time when we witness atmospheric rivers, bomb cyclones, and rising seas, we need to move away from fossil fuels. It's time. Staunton can lead the way by setting an example of how to do solar right.

I'm for clean, renewable energy. We need it now, and I welcome this project.

Contact city council and let them know how you feel at [CityCouncil@ci.staunton.va.us](mailto:CityCouncil@ci.staunton.va.us)

Access the project proposal here:

<https://www.ci.staunton.va.us/Home/Components/MeetingsManager/MeetingAgenda/ShowPrimaryDocument/?agendaID=1123&isPub=True&includeTrash=False>

*Robert "Bobby" Whitescarver is a retired soil conservationist from USDA, co-owner of Whiskey Creek Angus in Churchville, a watershed restoration consultant, and teaches natural resources management at James Madison University. He can be reached at [bobby.whitescarver@gettingmoreontheground.com](mailto:bobby.whitescarver@gettingmoreontheground.com)*

