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## Copake solar farm at issue

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COPAKE — More than 150 people, including Assemblywoman Didi Barrett, D-106, tuned in Thursday night to learn more about the town's plans to rebuff Hecate Energy's proposed 500-acre solar farm.

The size and scale of Hecate's proposed project, known as the Shepherd's Run Solar Farm, has generated "considerable concerns" from the local community, reflected in the high turnout on the virtual meeting, Town Supervisor Jeanne Mettler said Friday,

"People are invested in following this process and seeing where it goes," said Mettler, adding that she was gratified by the level of community involvement.

Barrett said she will support the town.

"Whatever we can do, we are with you," the assemblywoman told residents.

The town hired Rochester-based environmental lawyer Benjamin Wisniewski in the interest of transparency to better understand and respond to Hecate's proposed 110,000 megawatt solar project, Mettler said. Wisniewski was retained in April 2020.

Wisniewski reviewed the town's solar zoning laws, adopted in 2017, and suggested amendments to strengthen the language promoting "agricultural uses and preservation of existing farmland." A draft of Wisniewski's proposed amendments will be presented at the Town Board's August 8 meeting, when the public will have an opportunity to comment, Mettler said.

The changes include restricting solar panels from occupying more than 20% of any given land parcel, prohibiting the use of large-scale battery storage systems, Wisniewski explained during his presentation Thursday night. The proposed amendments are intended to "protect the town's unique characteristics" and encourage "appropriate development," he said.

Copake is amending its solar zoning laws in response to changes in the state energy siting laws intended to speed up the approval process for large-scale solar and wind projects. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has set a goal of obtaining 70 percent of the state's electricity from renewable sources by 2030.

The changes to the state energy policy mean that "places like Copake are at increased risk of seeing large-scale wind and solar projects come to town," Wisniewski said.

Wisniewski stressed the importance of strong solar zoning laws in the event that other developers besides Hecate propose projects in Copake.

In addition to laying out his proposed amendments, Wisniewski also gave an overview of the solar siting process.

The town is at the beginning of long and complicated process, he said. The Shepherd's Run Solar Farm project remains in the preliminary scoping phase, one of several stages Hecate must complete before submitting its application to the state.

The preliminary scoping phase can last up to year and includes ample opportunity for public participation, Wisniewski said.

Copake Deputy Supervisor Richard Wolf, who is serving as the project liaison, decried the lack of local input on the project so far in the meeting's opening remarks.

Wolf said many residents had not received invitations from Hecate to participate in virtual forums that were held in place of public meetings in light of the ban on in-person gatherings.

Wolf said many residents are not opposed to renewable energy, but are worried the project will lead to compromised pastoral views and decreased property values.

Hecate Project Developer Alex Campbell, who was on Friday's virtual meeting but did not speak, praised Wisniewski's presentation but said it glossed over many of the project's positives.

"This project will bring in millions of dollars to the community and the county," Campbell said Friday. "There are not a lot of other projects that offer tax revenue without requiring public infrastructure or water resources."

Campbell also sought to highlight the project's environmental benefits.

"Climate change is a real thing. New York state is leader in the U.S. for climate change mitigation policy, but we have a long way to go. If people say they support clean energy, here is their chance to support it."

Campbell is hosting weekly video meetings on Zoom every Wednesday morning at 10 a.m. to answer questions about the project from the public. The link to the meetings can be found at:

[www.shepherdsrunsolar.com/weeklyzoom/](http://www.shepherdsrunsolar.com/weeklyzoom/)