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Supervisors oppose Shepherd's Run

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A portion of where the Shepherd's Run Solar Farm would be sited. File photo

COPAKE — The Columbia County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution opposing the proposed Shepherd's Run solar project in Copake.

The resolution states Columbia County is opposed to the construction of the proposed 360-acre, 60 megawatt solar project.

Shepherd's Run has become a highly debated topic over the past year largely because of the project's size and its potential impact on the area. A zoning law in the town of Copake limits the size of solar projects to a maximum of 10 acres.

“I am very grateful for the Board of Supervisors’ support of Copake and their strong opposition to both the project as currently envisioned and the violation of Home Rule which recent legislation represents,” Copake Town Supervisor Jeanne Mettler said in a statement.

The resolution discusses “long-term adverse impacts” of the project, such as loss of prime farmland and natural resources, displacement of native and endangered wildlife and birds, degradation of rural viewsheds and a major thoroughfare to the Taconic State Park, Catamount Mountain Resort, the hamlets of Hillsdale, Copake and neighboring Berkshires.

The resolution also states it is expected the project will negatively affect the property values of homes situated adjacent to the installation as well as those which would overlook the installation.

Hecate Energy, the developer behind the proposed project announced last month it would be moving the project forward using the newer siting process called 94-C. New York state allowed for projects in the first phases of development, such as the Shepherd’s Run project, to either opt into 94-C, which all new projects will be using, or to continue to follow the previous siting process, known as Article 10. In March, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said the new regulations were adopted by the state to dramatically accelerate siting and construction of major renewable energy facilities across the state.

“Contrary to recent claims, 94-c is not rigorous, it does not provide for public participation and it does not guarantee a right to trial,” Mettler said. “I know that my fellow Supervisors support renewable energy, but they also support preservation of Home Rule, due process and our local environment. The legislation passed in New York State in the past month which exempts 94-c from SEQRA review is a travesty.”

Sensible Solar for Rural New York, a local group opposed to the Shepherd’s Run project, but is in favor of renewable energy have said they applaud the unanimous vote by the Board of Supervisors.

“With its vote, the Columbia County Board of Supervisors sent a clear and concise message to Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Senate and Assembly... There must be reasonable and real balance between our state’s fight against climate change and respecting the zoning laws, natural resources, farmland, property values, and tourism- and agriculture-centric economies of rural New York,” said Darin Johnson of Sensible Solar for Rural New York in a statement.

Sensible Solar has criticized Hecate for avoided discussions and negotiations with Copake town leaders and community members. Hecate Energy Project Developer Alex Campbell said he has met with local residents to discuss the project and issues they may have had with it.

“We still believe the project is a good project for Columbia County,” Campbell said. “And we will continue to work with the town to find a middle ground solution that hopefully addresses concerns and provides the clean energy that we all want for the future.”

Hecate currently manages more than 20 operational or late-stage development power-generation projects in the United States, Canada and Jordan, according to its website. Campbell said there had initially been some opposition to Hecate's project in Greene County, but they had been able to work together to alleviate some similar concerns.

“Outside of that there have not been many opposed projects in all the projects that Hecate works on,” Campbell said. “There's always folks that don't want to see it, but we have to get past the folks that don't want to see it because long-term climate change will dramatically change what views people have and that's the important part, and that's what's really changed over the last couple of years.”

Campbell said he hopes Hecate and the people and officials of Columbia County and Copake will be able to work together and come to terms with the project.

Hecate is planning to have a collective discussion with key parties about the visuals of the project likely at the end of June. He said they want to discuss screening and landscaping and the visualizations for the project in a visual workshop.

Construction on the project has been estimated by Hecate to start in the first quarter of 2023.