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Copake solar project faces concerns as state holds review

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COPAKE — The proposal to build a 42-megawatt solar farm is coming into sharp focus this week as state legislators criticize the plan ahead of a decision due from Albany and an announcement from Hecate Energy LLC to hold a virtual open house for residents.

The pros and cons of Shepherd's Run Solar Farm have been debated since 2017. Last spring the state denied Hecate's application. In December, the company refiled, triggering a 60-day period for the state to respond. That clock runs out on Friday, Feb. 21. Hecate will hold its virtual open house on Wednesday, Feb. 19 at 4 p.m.

In the weeks since the new filing, comments for and against have been submitted by residents, groups, and recently by state legislators.

State Sen. Michelle Hinchey, D-41, who chairs the Agriculture Committee, wrote to Zeryai Hagos, executive director of the Office of Renewable Energy Siting, ORES, on Feb. 12, stating: "I have followed this issue closely over the past few years, and not only does this project pose significant risks to our environment and water supply, I believe Hecate has acted in bad faith throughout the process.

"It is hard for me to understand why ORES is still going through the review process with a proposal it has already found to be flawed and worthy of dismissal," she wrote.

State Assemblymember Didi Barrett, D-106, who chairs the Energy Committee, wrote to Gov. Kathy Hochul on Feb. 5, expressing concerns "of many of my constituents, including the Town of Copake leadership." Barrett noted to the governor that this was her third letter concerning the project since Hochul took office.

"It has been my experience that from the outset," Barrett wrote, "Hecate has failed to act in good faith, neither communicated with or addressed the concerns of the Town leadership and community as a whole.

"As an example, the newest application still does not reflect the recommendations of the com-

munity-wide Craryville Gateway Working Group, which I served on for several years. The application also fails to take into consideration the Department of Environmental Conservation's newly enacted wetland regulations."

In her letter, Barrett quoted Hochul, who in a 2023 veto message said: "It is incumbent on renewable energy developers to cultivate and maintain strong ties to their host communities throughout the planning, siting, and operation of all large-scale projects."

Hudson Mayor Kamal Johnson wrote about concerns the city's Common Council cited in October 2024 about the safety of Hudson's water supply. The Hudson Council adopted a resolution in opposition of the Shepherd's Run project siting on the watershed of Taghkanic Creek, which supplies 100% of the water for the city.

"Unfortunately, we have not seen any evidence that the protection of the Taghkanic Watershed, and thus, Hudson's water supply, or compliance with 10 NYCRR 109.1, has been addressed in Hecate's application to ORES," Johnson wrote. "We do not consider platitudes by

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—State Sen. Michelle Hinchey, D-41

the developer promising to rely on an Environmental Monitor (which Hecate appoints) to 'promote avoidance of unpermitted wetland impacts' a substitute for guaranteed assurances that no harm will come to Hudson's water. We can point to examples of instances where water supplies have been negatively impacted by solar facilities, and if there's even a chance that could happen to Hudson, it must be seriously addressed BEFORE any permit is issued."

Sensible Solar for Rural New York, a group of citizens, this month reiterated its opposition to the project. Sara Traberman, of Sensible Solar, wrote: "It is clear that Hecate's application fails to address extremely important potential impacts of this project, including wetland damage, risks to Hudson's drinking water, and fire risks to the nearby Taconic Central School and Audubon Rheinstrom



PHOTO BY JOHN COSTON

Hecate Energy's Matt Levin, center, discusses details of the Shepherd's Run project with Copake residents at an in-person open house on April 3, 2024, in Hillsdale.

wildlife sanctuary. ORES should not grant it a permit."

Friends of Columbia Solar, whose members are residents of the community who support Shepherd's Run, has submitted supporting comment on the ORES website. Following Hecate's refiled application, Dan Haas, representing the group, wrote: "What's needed now is not more pointless delays, but as quick a start as possible towards the completion of a solar facility that will benefit not only the Town of Copake but, given the urgency of climate action, the planet Earth as well."

The project has drawn more than 200 comments filed on the ORES website.

Hecate's Matt Levine, senior director of development, said the newly submitted application includes changes based on community feedback. Some of them are: excluding battery storage; native tree and shrub planting to minimize sightlines for neighbors; extending and connecting local hiking trails and recreational and education opportunities; providing for sheep grazing and several other priorities discussed with residents.

Levine also stated in an email: "Hecate is committed to ensuring the Shepherd's Run Solar Farm is built in way that preserves and protects the natural resources of Copake and the surrounding community. After extensive reviews covering every aspect of the project's impact

on the Taghkanic Creek Watershed, it is clear that building Shepherd's Run will actually improve water quality — especially compared to current land use — as Troy Weldy from the Columbia Land Conservancy noted in a presentation to the Conservation Advisory Council in Hudson earlier this month.

"As our permit application moves forward, we will continue to engage with the community to ensure their concerns are incorporated so we can build a project that helps New York meet its clean energy goals while preserving and protecting the natural beauty of Columbia County. As I said in my letter to the community, the project has already been greatly improved by incorporating the feedback we have heard along the way."

Town of Copake Supervisor Richard Wolf, who has regularly posted solar updates on the town's website, updated the status at a Feb. 13 board meeting. In an interview he criticized Hecate.

"This belated invitation to a virtual meeting is another example of Hecate's lack of engagement with the town, with the town's people and it's scheduled for midweek when they well know that week-enders won't be here and anybody who is working may well not be available, anybody with children may not be available and the fact that they don't have the courtesy to come and meet with the community in person is another indication of their approach to this entire matter.

"The timing, of course, right at the end of the 60-day period is further evidence," Wolf said.