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FEATURED

Michelle Hinchey and Didi Barrett speak out against Shepherd's Run solar farm in Copake County

Spenser Walsh
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State Sen. Michelle Hinchey, D-41, spoke out against the proposed Shepherd's Run solar farm in Copake Thursday.

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COPAKE — Columbia County's representatives in Albany spoke out against the planned Shepard's Run solar farm in Copake at a public Thursday.

State Sen. Michelle Hinchey, D-41, and Assembly Member Didi Barrett, D-106, criticized Illinois-based Hecate Energy's plan to build the solar farm at Copake town hall during one of five public comment sessions hosted by the Office of Renewable Energy and Siting and Electric Transmission.

The Renewable Energy Office is the state agency responsible for granting the siting permit that the project needs to begin construction.

In November, the office granted Hecate Energy a draft permit to build the 215-acre, 42-megawatt Shepherd's Run solar farm.

Hinchey painted the fight between the small, rural town and the energy company in biblical terms.

"From the very beginning, this has been a David and Goliath relationship. It also feels a little bit like 'Groundhog Day,'" Hinchey said, referring to the multiple times Hecate Energy has pursued a solar farm permit in Copake. "The comments that I've submitted today will be my sixth official comments about this project and my eighth set of public statements against this specific project."

Hecate's initial application for the solar project — a 60-megawatt project on a 265-acre parcel — was rejected by the Renewable Energy Office in 2024 after the company lost access to a parcel of land that would have allowed an access road. The company reapplied for a smaller 42-megawatt project in December 2024.

During her speech, Hinchey highlighted a letter her office had received from the New York Power Authority saying they would not be assisting Hecate Energy with the development of Shepherd's Run; however, the project was included on a December list of projects the power authority intends to support in the coming year.

"They [NYPA] see the same thing we've been talking about for the last more than three years that this isn't the right one to move forward," Hinchey said.

As far as Hecate Energy understands, NYPA is still committed to the project, Senior Director of Development Matt Levine said Friday.

"Based upon our conversations with NYPA last week, NYPA has not pulled out of the project. We remain on their strategic plan," Levine said.

"It's disappointing that certain state officials are urging NYPA to remove the project," he said, noting the company would be moving forward with or without the agency's support.



Assemblymember Didi Barrett, D-106, speaks out against the proposed Shepherd's Run solar farm during a public hearing in Copake Wednesday.
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While the need for renewable energy is dire, renewable projects should not threaten other natural resources, like farmland, Hinchey said.

"We need renewable energy. We needed it yesterday. Quite frankly, we needed it 50 years ago," Hinchey said. "But we have to be thoughtful and strategic and smart about the way that we do it. We cannot sacrifice our pristine farmland and exchange a climate and energy crisis for a food crisis."

Another concern raised by opponents of the project is that Hecate Energy is in poor financial shape and will likely sell the construction permit to another unknown corporation. In November, anti-Shepherd's Run group Sensible Solar for Rural New York alleged the company was in default on hundreds of millions of dollars in loans.

Concerns about Hecate's financial state are valid, Hinchey said.

"We as a state shouldn't be investing in companies that may not be financially solvent," Hinchey said. "We're hearing conversation in there today about how they want to sell the rights to another company. This feels like we're just shifting money, and we should not be. Hecate has to prove that they are financially solvent if they talk about being able to return that farmland to agricultural production in 30 years."

Levine said the company is in good financial shape and fully committed to the project despite an expected merger with Spanish energy company Repsol failing to go through.

On Thursday, the company announced it is going public on the NASDAQ exchange as part of a merger with EGH Acquisition, a special purpose acquisition company. The deal is valued at \$1.2 billion and will provide Hecate Energy with \$155 million in project capital, according to the company.

"Hecate has recalibrated and is in a strong position going into 2026, and we're excited to complete this project to deliver clean, renewable energy," Levine said.

In her remarks, Barrett highlighted her office's long history of working with local officials and residents against the project. As a result of that community engagement, Barrett's office, local officials and residents worked to come up with community recommendations to Hecate on the project, which were ignored by the company, Barrett said.

"After significant public input and several incomplete permit applications, [the state] made the decision in 2024 to reject Hecate's energy application," Barrett said. "This decision provided Hecate the opportunity, we thought, to reset the conversation and work together with the community to develop a project consistent with the scale and the needs of the community. Instead, Hecate reapplied with an almost identical proposal."

The Smart, Integrated Tools for Energy Development (or SITED) Act, passed by Barrett and Hinchey in 2023, enables local communities to designate where they would like to see renewable energy built. Barrett said she hopes to see her legislation play a role in the Shepherd's Run process.

Hecate has worked with officials at all levels and included a majority of the recommendations from the community group Barrett referenced, Levine said. He said the company's implementation of a conservation plan, removal of battery storage from the project and ensuring the project has no direct damage to state-designated wetlands are examples of the company's good faith engagement and said he "can't recall ever failing to respond to outreach from any stakeholder of the project" and will continue to remain available.

Hecate Energy failing to engage in good faith with Copake residents was a charge leveled by nearly every elected official who spoke at the hearing.

Barrett called the company "sloppy and careless," and said they had made "little effort" to address town concerns or communicate with local officials, while Hinchey said the company had attempted to "steamroll the town at every turn."

"That is not how we in New York operate, and it's not how people should be coming into this community and to any community, quite frankly," Hinchey said.

Copake Town Supervisor Richard Wolf echoed allegations of a lack of communication.

"The last time town officials met with Hecate representatives was 21 months ago," Wolf said. "We hear now from the developer only indirectly, newspaper articles or letters and their comments are usually, as they say, false to the facts."

Hecate has failed to address many concerns, including the risk of fire, Wolf said.

"Proximity of the solar plant to the Taconic Hills Schools with fire safety and related toxic smoke concerns is a major worry," Wolf said.

He also pointed out that there would be very little access for firetrucks into the solar farm and that the all-volunteer Craryville Fire Company would be unlikely to muster sufficient manpower to fight a fire at the site.

The responsibility to create a fire plan for the schools lies with the district, but Hecate is happy to cooperate, Levine said.

"We understand that the Taconic Hills School district is required by law to have an evacuation plan. To the extent they have questions how Shepherd's Run could affect their plan, we are happy to discuss it with them," Levine said. "Hecate has retained experts in fire response to train local fire officials prior to construction start. Should a Taconic Hills School district representative wish to attend, they would be welcome."

A virtual hearing will be held Tuesday, and a decision about the permit is expected later this year.

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