

**RICHMOND COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES**

January 6, 2020

The Richmond County Planning Commission held its regularly scheduled meeting on Monday, January 6th, 2020, in the Public Meeting Room, County Administrative Building, Warsaw, VA.

The following members were present:

Rick Cox
Glenn Bowen
Harry Smith, Jr.
Brian Mothershead
Cassandra Jackson
John W. Lewis
Marion James Packett
Darnell Clayton
J.R. Fidler
Brian Mothershead

Also present:

R. Morgan Quicke, County Administrator
Hope Mothershead, Director of Planning and Zoning
Liz Hylan, Administrative Assistant
Louis Iannone, Strata Solar, Zoning Manager
Brent Neimann, PE, Strata Solar, Director of Civil Engineering
Richard Stuart, Attorney for Strata Solar
Approximately 12 others.

CALL TO ORDER, INVOCATION, AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Glenn Bowen called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Mr. Bowen gave the invocation and Mr. Lewis led everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance.

PUBLIC COMMENT

John Janson, an attorney representing the Lowery family, noted the Lowery family feels this meeting was not properly noticed under Virginia Code 15.2-2204 or that there's been a proper hearing on the relation to the Comprehensive Plan under 15.2-2232.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES – DECEMBER 9, 2019

Glenn Bowen asked if there were any additions or corrections to the minutes from the December 9, 2019 meeting. Mr. Lewis noted some recommended changes to the minutes. Cassandra Jackson made a motion to approve the minutes, as amended. J.R. Fidler seconded the motion and they were approved unanimously.

SOLAR PROJECT PRESENTATION- STRATA SOLAR

Mr. Quicke noted Representatives from Strata Solar have attended the meeting to present their presentation to the Planning Commission regarding their special exception application to build and operate a solar facility in Richmond County.

Mr. Quicke mentioned the County has spent several months with representatives from Strata Solar on their application. Mr. Quicke noted this is the first the Planning Commission has heard of this project other than being notified at a previous meeting.

Mr. Quicke stated this is not a public hearing. Mr. Quicke mentioned a public hearing for this application would be set at a later date.

Mr. Quicke noted this is the County's first application for a special exception to build and operate a solar facility in Richmond County. Mr. Quicke mentioned several years ago the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors did have the foresight to work on an ordinance, to guide and implement solar development if and when it ever did come to the County. Mr. Quicke noted it is the County's primary intention through this process to get it right procedurally.

Mr. Quicke mentioned Vivian Giles, the County's attorney with Sands Anderson, will be helping with guidance through this unfamiliar territory.

Mr. Quicke noted prior to this meeting Strata Solar held three meetings on three different occasions with the citizens and land owners of the area where the solar facility is being proposed. Mr. Quicke mentioned Strata Solar sent a letter to all adjoining property owners informing them of the application and giving them the time to come and discuss their plans prior to starting the permit process.

Mr. Louis Iannone, Zoning Manger, with Strata Solar noted this will be a multiple meeting/ hearing process. Mr. Iannone mentioned Strata wanted to introduce this project to the community before they had their first public meeting. Mr. Iannone noted they had approximately a dozen or more neighbors attend the meetings, with a wide range of comments from very positive to very concerned. Mr. Iannone also noted the perks of those meetings were to listen and try to develop a plan to address the concerns that were heard.

Mr. Iannone presented the Planning Commission the Bookers Mill Solar, LLC, Special Exception Solar Application.

Mr. Iannone mentioned Strata is one of the largest solar developers in the U.S. Mr. Iannone noted Strata operates amounts of solar equivalent of two nuclear power plants. Mr. Iannone mentioned they have 400 professional staff and approximately 1,000 construction staff. Mr. Iannone also mentioned Strata is a fully integrated developer.

Mr. Iannone noted the stages of a solar process are as follows: Develop, Engineer, Construct, Finance, Own, Operate and Maintain.

Mr. Iannone noted Strata also operates projects they did not develop or do not own. Mr. Iannone also noted they have projects in 22 states mainly in North Carolina and Virginia.

Mr. Iannone mentioned the Bookers Mill Solar facility will be 127 MW of clean, safe, and renewable energy. Mr. Iannone noted the project has 800 acres of solar equipment and 800 acres of resource protection areas and buffers.

Mr. Iannone mentioned the project will generate \$200,000 per year for five years initially for Richmond County. Mr. Iannone noted this will gradually start to decrease due to statutory state law depreciation.

Mr. Iannone noted this project will create approximately 400 temporary construction jobs, 10-15 permanent maintenance technician jobs such as landscape maintenance, and several mechanical and electrical technicians to maintain the equipment.

Mr. Iannone mentioned this project will be located 15 miles South East of Warsaw on Ridge Road, Maon Road, and Cedar Grove Road. Mr. Iannone noted this is a fairly lightly populated area.

Mr. Iannone noted there will be wildlife corridors throughout the project for wildlife access.

Mr. Iannone mentioned he hopes construction will start in the middle of 2021 with an 18 month process in hopes to turn on in 2022. Mr. Iannone noted the solar facility would operate for 30 years then decommission.

Mr. Iannone gave an overview of what the Bookers Mill Solar application included. Mr. Iannone noted in the application you will find the compliance with solar and special exception ordinances, extensive environmental studies, economic impact analysis, property impact analysis, decommissioning plan and cost estimate, and construction traffic plan and road repair bond. Mr. Iannone also noted a big part of the application is the statement of justification.

Mr. Iannone mentioned this project has no environmental impact.

Mr. Iannone noted this is a relatively new and fast-growing industry in Virginia and will create a lot of permanent jobs.

Mr. Iannone mentioned this project will generate millions in local spending on Goods and Services. Mr. Iannone noted nearly \$200,000 of additional tax revenue beyond what the property is paying as timber land right now. Mr. Iannone mentioned over the life of the project \$3,440,000 of additional tax revenue would be received with no cost for services from the County.

Mr. Iannone noted that as to the permanent jobs Strata will try and hire as many local people as possible.

Mr. Iannone mentioned 50% of the project is preserved streams and wetland buffers.

Mr. Iannone noted this project will not endanger the public health or safety. Mr. Iannone mentioned there will be no hazardous materials, no noise, no emissions, no electronic communication interference and no air traffic interference.

Mr. Iannone mentioned Strata has put considerable thought into the construction traffic. Mr. Iannone also mentioned every truck will have delivery instructions of where they can and cannot go. Mr. Iannone noted any road damage that is caused will be bonded if not fixed when it is damaged.

Mr. Iannone noted the cost to decommission will be over a million and a half dollars to remove the equipment in the end. Mr. Iannone mentioned at the end of 30 years the panels will be generating about 80% of what they are on day one.

Mr. Iannone noted this will be a very well screened project by fencing and woods.

Mr. Iannone mentioned these projects are evaluated by a certified appraiser.

Chairman Bowen asked how long the construction phase is anticipated to be. Mr. Iannone mentioned approximately 12-18 months. Chairman Bowen also asked how long the high density traffic will be there. Mr. Neimann, Director of Civil Engineering, stated the bulk of the traffic will be in the middle part of the project. Mr. Neimann noted a project this size would anticipate site civil construction purposes of about 5,100 trucks. Mr. Neimann mentioned these trucks would be work equipment, dump trucks for stone for access roads, service related trucks, waste removable trucks, material deliveries and employees.

Mr. Neimann noted general construction activity will take place dawn to dusk .

Mr. Lewis asked Mrs. Mothershead will the property values change for the property's that this equipment is being installed on. Mrs. Mothershead mentioned it will increase the real estate value of those lots.

Mr. Lewis asked if the reason for decommission is because the lease has run out on the property owners or can you continue to use the facility after the 30 years. Mr. Iannone noted at that point Strata would have to re-negotiate with both Dominion and the land owners. Mr. Lewis asked if it could feasibly produce power after 30 years. Mr. Iannone noted it could, and the most valuable and difficult part of the project is getting it put together and started. Mr. Lewis asked to clarify, would there not be enough degradation to the materials to warrant shutting down the facility. Mr. Iannone mentioned it won't need to be torn out because it's not operating properly.

Mr. Lewis mentioned Mr. Iannone noted using local workers but mentioned having 400 professionals in North Carolina and asked would those 400 professionals be coming to Virginia. Mr. Neimann noted it would be more of a permanent worker from an operation and maintenance perspective. Mr. Neimann mentioned Strata has depots in Virginia currently with less than 50 permanent employees. Mr. Neimann also mentioned as they continue to build projects or operate and maintain projects for utility's depots are opened strategically based on project location.

Mr. Lewis commented his concern is keeping the local workers employed. Mr. Neimann noted the construction workers that can be hired and trained, they like the company as well as the company likes them, and they are within travel distance of a couple hours there's no reason why they couldn't be an employee of Strata.

Mr. Neimann noted there could be weekend construction and Strata will be mindful when building the construction schedule. Mr. Neimann also noted one of the biggest things with this project to be successful is the interconnection.

Mr. Smith asked about the road setbacks being 50ft. Mr. Neimann explained currently the preservation of the existing vegetation from 50ft. was available to the fence line and that would be measured to the right of way. Mr. Neimann noted the Boundary Survey is not complete yet.

Mr. Smith noted Northern Neck Electric has transmission lines and poles along this site. Mr. Smith asked about cutting the trees down from the road to the site. Mr. Neimann noted no trees will be cut down. Mr. Neimann mentioned if there's existing vegetation then that is their preference because it's instant, hardy, and will survive. Mr. Neimann also mentioned if they take credit for any existing vegetation they would prescribe about 50ft. of width of what's there with the fence behind that.

Mr. Neimann mentioned in the areas that have no vegetation they will plant evergreens. Mr. Neimann noted these evergreens grow an average of about a foot a year. Mr. Neimann mentioned generally the center line of the torque is about 5 ft. above grade and the panel rotates around that, maintaining an edge clearance to avoid interference with vegetation. Mr. Neimann noted solar panels range about 6 ½ feet tall and about 10-11 ft. above grade at max tilt.

Mr. Smith asked how many years until you would see trees and vegetation and not see the solar panels. Mr. Neimann noted about five years should get you clear on the fencing with variable topography and depending on the rest of the site. Mr. Neimann mentioned that's another reason why Strata prefers to preserve vegetation.

Mr. Jackson asked if this project would be using local dump truck owners. Mr. Neimann mentioned the contractors may not be local to this community but they are certainly familiar to driving from their quarry to projects in this vicinity. Mr. Neimann noted these dump trucks will not be coming from North Carolina or West Virginia.

Mr. Cox asked about building transmission lines and how Strata gets power where it needs to go to Dominion. Mr. Neimann noted no transmission lines need to be built and this project interconnects to the transmission line. Mr. Neimann mentioned Strata builds a substation for the project that steps the voltage to transmission voltage. Mr. Neimann noted there aren't any transmission lines running to the project. Mr. Neimann also noted this project will run on medium voltage to the substation and the substation then steps it up to transmission voltage.

Mr. Packett asked what the procedure will be to convert this land and get it prepared. Mr. Neimann noted this land will be timbered and fully grubbed. Mr. Neimann also noted the grub material and any timber that's not valuable will be chipped on site and used as erosion control measures. Mr. Neimann mentioned the land will not be a flat site.

Mr. Packett suggested if possible getting permission and letting citizens or Planning Commission members take a brief tour of the Montross facility for questions and answers. Mr. Packett expressed his concern in making sure whoever Strata hires to do research goes above and beyond looking at recorded right of ways, by talking to land owners.

Mr. Clayton asked about burning excessive debris on premises. Mr. Neimann noted there will be no burning on site.

Mr. Cox asked about using herbicides to keep any regrowth from coming back. Mr. Neimann mentioned they do not use any more than anyone else does to manage their turf lawn. Mr. Neimann also mentioned the construction activity generally will keep it at bay.

Mr. Neimann noted in general they timber, grub and mulch that material using it as erosion control measures. Mr. Neimann also noted there will be many basins on this site to control storm water during construction and permeate storm water. Mr. Neimann mentioned once it is cleared and grubbed to grade they will seed and straw immediately.

Mr. Neimann noted there will be service at the substation for the permanent maintenance which is a requirement. Mr. Neimann also noted this will be a single phase service.

Mr. Fidler asked who is responsible for the decommission process after 30 years. Mr. Neimann noted the project owner is responsible.

Chairman Bowen opened the floor to public comment.

Carol Lowery located on Maon Road, expressed her concern about being impacted by this project. Mrs. Lowery mentioned she is really worried about the runoff in her backyard. Ms. Lowery also mentioned she has a well in her backyard and has been told and saw that all these solar panels are not toxic free they have lead and certain amount of poisoning. Ms. Lowery noted they also claim that after they take these panels up after 30 years the land is no good. Mrs. Lowery mentioned we are prone to have hurricanes every so often and when all those trees are cut down the hurricane winds will tear everything off. Ms. Lowery stated what bothers her most is the animals not having food. Ms. Lowery also stated she is worried about her property. Ms. Lowery asked the Board to think hard about down the road of what could become of the solar panels.

Jay Buit a neighbor of Ms. Lowery, mentioned one of the gentlemen talked how safe the solar panels are but what about the metals that are known to be carcinogenic that composes these things. Mr. Buiett mentioned the County getting \$200,000 from this project and ripping the heart out of Richmond County. Mr. Buiett noted it was stated that this solar facility will not affect property values. Mr. Buiett mentioned does anyone believe you will get what you paid for your property or want to build a house or subdivision looking at this monstrosity.

Keith Lowery located on 1531 Maon Road, noted himself along with his mom would be totally encompassed by this project. Mr. Lowery asked does Strata use any American made solar panels. Mr. Iannone mentioned they come from all over the world some come from the United States and some come from China. Mr. Neimann stated this project is too far out to know where these projects panels will come from. Mr. Lowery noted you can go online and lookup where tornadoes, hurricanes and hail storms have torn these solar panels up and stuff leaches in the ground. Mr. Lowery mentioned he built his home in 1993 and the County would not let him put his septic field on a certain place because of a slight incline due to the Chesapeake Bay Act. Mr. Lowery noted this project is so close to waterways that it would impact. Mr. Lowery mentioned Huawei is a Chinese company that has the ability to shut down the power grid if they wanted. Mr. Lowery mentioned this project is being funded through the local government and given subsidies that are backed by rich people such as google, apple, amazon, and Microsoft and they do not care about him, Mr. Buiett, or his mom.

Ms. Lowery lastly mentioned it is in the Ordinance of Richmond County that whatever goes on in Richmond County is supposed to be for the harmony of the environment that you live around, and these solar facilities coming in are taking the harmony and beauty away.

John Janson noted the Microsoft server farm in Boyden was mentioned earlier. Mr. Janson mentioned the server farm was put there with five transmission lines and several redundant power sources and an abundant supply of water. Mr. Janson mentioned the solar companies came in after that and flooded the County. Mr. Janson noted Mecklenburg now has an ordinance that limits the solar farms to 500 acres including the buffers with several restrictions and has to comply with the Comprehensive Plan. Mr. Janson asked the Board to back up and see if this fits the Comprehensive Plan or if this is what the County wants. Mr. Janson noted the reason Mecklenburg went to 500 acres max was to protect the agricultural nature of the County and to prevent taking huge amounts of agricultural land out of production. Mr. Janson mentioned as for the setbacks the Lowery's were told the setbacks were 100ft setbacks but it was stated tonight 50 ft. setbacks and is debatable and can change from area to area. Mr. Janson noted on the four roads that are impacted he has counted about 155 residents that reside on those four roads. Mr. Janson also noted letters were only sent out to the adjoining landowners but if you take a look at all 155 residents you might get a different feeling. Mr. Janson asked the County to step back and take a look at this and does this fit the Comprehensive Plan or if this is what the County wants and if it does, does the County want 1600 acres or 300/ 400 acres something more manageable.

Chairman Bowen closed the public comment period.

OTHER BUSINESS

Chairman Bowen thanked everyone for coming out and noted this was the first time the Commissioners have heard this project. Chairman Bowen also noted no decision will be occurring at this time and this meeting was just for Strata to introduce themselves to the Commissioners and to hear the public concerns.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, Glenn Bowen adjourned the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,
Liz Hylan
Commission Secretary