

## Statewide opposition to local solar farm surfaces at hearing

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**Kyle Harmon of Salisbury attended the Feb. 27 public hearing in La Plata along with members of the Nanticoke and Piscataway tribes.**

**La Plata, MD** - A public hearing conducted by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) Wednesday evening, Feb. 27 in La Plata drew considerable praise for one of the top components of renewable energy—solar power. However, to borrow the mantra of the real estate community, it's all about "location, location, location." Most of the speakers weighing in on a proposal to clear cut a Charles County forest in a critical watershed labeled the proposed solar farm project, which would benefit Georgetown University in the District of Columbia, as a huge net loss for the environment.

"It doesn't make any sense to kill an environmental area to save the environment," said Dr. Richard Cook of Waldorf, who was one of dozens of speakers requesting that MDE deny the permit to allow the project's applicant to breach wetlands within the forested area. While most of the speakers were Charles County residents, other testimony was offered from residents of Harford County and the Eastern Shore. The out-of-county commenters included members of both the Piscataway and Nanticoke tribes, and several Georgetown University students, who felt their school's intention to clear a forested area miles from the campus with ample impervious surfaces was ill-advised.

The planned solar farm, consisting of over 100,000 solar panels, would provide the Georgetown campus with 75,000 megawatt hours of power annually. The university's collaboration with Origo Energy USA was announced in September 2017. The 240-acre tract where the solar farm will be located is on Shugart Valley Place in La Plata.

"This is an important step," said Maryland Environmental Secretary Ben Grumbles, who told the audience at the hearing's start that MDE intended to keep the record open on the issue. After the Feb. 27 hearing—which was halted just prior to 10 p.m.—Grumbles stated that his department was awaiting the outcome of a bill sponsored by State Senator Paul Pinsky [D-District 22] that would establish a commission on development of a blueprint for solar energy projects in Maryland. The measure—Senate Bill 744, aims to protect natural resources and productive farms in the solar project process.

Prior to comments from the public, Dane Bauer of H&B Solutions, a Delaware-based consulting firm that analyzed the project area told the attendees "our goal was to completely eliminate any impacts on wetlands. Unavoidable impacts were less than an acre." Bauer added that the applicants intended to exceed mitigation requirements for replanting trees.

Still, a majority of commenters took issue with the plan to disturb Southern Maryland's largest forest. Kevin Grimes, who lives on Nanjemoy Creek, labeled the project "counterproductive" and "a lose-lose for Charles County." Grimes implored the MDE to "protect the threatened ecosystem."

"I am for solar but to tear down trees makes absolutely no sense," said David Maule of Belair.

Mark Holt of Indian Head stated that in light of the pending legislation in Annapolis, the hearing was "premature." He added that removing trees, grading the site and installing solar panels means "we'll get torrents and runoff."

"We've seen people not respect the land," said Kyle Harmon of Salisbury, who identified himself as a member of the Nanticoke tribe. Harmon affirmed that disturbing the forest would denigrate the quality of the water stream. "Without water there is no life."

"What you do here affects me in Takoma Park," said Mary Rooker of the Montgomery County Green Party. Rooker said while the Green Party supports solar power it opposes Georgetown's Charles County solar farm project. "When you harm the ecosystem you harm human beings," said Rooker.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Eric Fisher said Georgetown's goal was a noble one but due to the location the project "does not move us forward it moves us back. We ask that the applicant and Georgetown University find a new site."

The few voices of support for the project included the Charles County Chamber of Commerce. The chairman of the chamber's Board of Directors, Daniel Michael, said the project is an example of "how business and the environment can coexist." Noting the construction jobs the project will create, Michael said the project is "green economic development." Michael added that the project was deemed consistent with Charles County's Comprehensive Plan.

Amanda Sigillito, MDE's chief of Non-Tidal Wetlands presided over the hearing. Noting the curfew Charles County Government had for use of the building where the hearing was held, Sigillito announced a continuation of the testimony would be scheduled. Sigillito said the record would be held open until April 17. An environmental assessment of the plan from Georgetown University is expected to be ready sometime in March.

Contact Marty Madden at [marty.madden@thebaynet.com](mailto:marty.madden@thebaynet.com)

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