

DC commissioners say no to Liberty solar plant



People were on the floor and in the hall for the July 2 Douglas County Commission meeting. Photos/Anne Knowles

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – The Douglas County Commission has denied another application for a solar facility in Carson Valley.

Citing too many unknowns about the project, and a few surprises, the commissioners on July 2 unanimously rejected the application by Greenstone Renewables to build a 260-acre, 20 megawatt solar plant on Muller Lane.

“We’re finding out things today I wasn’t aware of and I don’t like that,” commission Chairman Doug Johnson said. “It’s OK, that’s the nature of the beast.”

After more than four hours of presentations, public comment and discussion, the commissioners agreed the project did not meet the county’s mandate to maintain a scenic and rural valley.

“I can’t get past the location,” said Commissioner Nancy McDermid. “The Planning Commission is the gatekeeper of the

master plan and I believe the ones that voted for this project relied on private property rights and ignored the master plan.”

A special use permit required for the project was approved by the Douglas County Planning Commission by a 4-3 vote at its May 12 meeting.



Commissioners had volumes of paperwork to read before making their decision.

That decision was appealed by Steve and Mary Walker, whose home is the only residence to abut the project property.

Their appeal contested six of the 16 conditions the planning commission imposed on the permit and four of its eight findings.

Those disputes centered on mitigation of glare from panels, noise in high winds, dust control, irrigation loss and wildlife impact, particularly to the bird population.

“We ask that you deny the application. It was an erroneous decision in conflict with the county master plan and recommendations of the Valley Vision plan,” said Steve Walker during his presentation to the board.

Walker also said an additional 40 acres would be required for a potential battery storage unit, bringing the total project

acreage to 300 acres, which was news to the commissioners.

“I have a question I did not have before,” said Commissioner Steve Thaler after presentations from the Walkers and from Keith Rutledge with Greenstone Renewables. “This battery storage facility. I was not aware of this additional 40 acres. That’s taken me by surprise.”

Rutledge said Greenstone did not include the battery storage unit in its application because it was uncertain if it would be needed, and that the developer would return to acquire permission for that in the future.

But Walker pointed to the minutes of the Planning Commission meeting, in which staff said the battery storage facility would be considered an accessory use and would need no further permits.

Daniel Leck, a local appraiser engaged by the Walkers, said the solar plant would not only impact the Walkers’ property value but have a ripple effect in the community. He estimated property values in Douglas County, which stand at \$6 billion, could drop between 5 and 10 percent, or by \$300 million to \$600 million.

The Walkers helped to generate a lot of public interest in the Greenstone project, collecting 700 signatures on a petition opposing the project.

The commissioners said they had received hundreds of emails and phone calls from county residents.

At least 200 people attended the county commissioners meeting, jamming the room and outside halls. Twenty-eight people rose to offer public comment, the majority of who opposed the project.

One complaint for many was the fact the power generated by the solar plant would be going to California customers serviced by

Liberty Utilities, which had entered into an initial contract with Greenstone for the power generated.

Travis Johnson, Liberty Utilities' director of Utility Planning and Business Development, spoke during public comment, to say those customers are all around Lake Tahoe. However, Liberty has no Nevada customers.

"Liberty Utilities is disappointed by the decision of Douglas County Commission. We believe that Greenstone's proposed solar project would be an environmentally responsible means of bringing renewable resources to the region, as well as providing reliability improvements to the Carson Valley. Liberty remains committed to the pursuit of cost-effective renewable development for its 49,000 electric customers in the Lake Tahoe region," Liberty Utilities' VP of Operations Rich Salgo told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The owner of the Muller Lane property, which was set to be leased by Greenstone, also spoke.

"We feel strongly that we all have property rights," said Jon Park. "We love to ranch. We love to irrigate our property. At the end of the day if this was a perfect world, we'd just ranch."

Barbara Byington, whose ranch is adjacent to the Park property, also spoke in support of the plan.

"I border it, but I'm in favor of it," said Byington. "I've kept my ranch green for all you people who want it green. But how can I keep it green in this drought? I think we ranchers need something. Maybe it's not a solar farm, but every time we come to you, you say no, you can't have that."

In the end, the board, acting as the board of adjustments, voted unanimously to approve the Walker's appeal and deny the solar project.

In July 2014, the county commission approved an ordinance adding solar to the county's agricultural zoning.

In March, the commissioners denied a request by E.On Climate and Renewables for a 320-acre solar plant on Bently Ranch because it was too close to nearby residences. In June, they passed a 180-day moratorium on solar projects, but excluded the Greenstone plan because the application was already in process.

Greenstone could file a petition for judicial review. It would need to be filed within 25 days.