

LaFayette Advisory Conservation Commission

Solar Farms in LaFayette

Lately, solar farms have been the subject of activities in the Town of LaFayette. There is a solar farm newly constructed on Sentinel Heights Road (across the road from the gas pipeline facility) by C2 Energy Development. There is a farm being proposed for 3660 Apulia Road by Carley Farm Solar, LLC and Dimon Solar, LLC. Last summer, Supervisor McConnell requested the LACC to review the current town law about solar farms (Town Code §290-32(H)) and recommend changes to update it and, more recently, align it with the newly adopted Comprehensive Plan. The changes were approved by the Town Board on March 8. This article describes the overarching interests LACC considered when developing its recommendations.

As a group focused on conservation, the LACC understands the long-term benefits that solar energy provides, primarily with respect to natural resource preservation and air pollution reduction. We also know that solar farms can have, if not properly sited and/or designed, a negative impact on the local community, primarily in the form of visual impacts and, to a lesser degree, noise and soil erosion.

LaFayette's new Comprehensive Plan makes clear that our residents highly value our open spaces, farmlands, and scenic vistas. According to resident surveys, it is the most valued Town asset. One of five goals in the Plan is dedicated to preserving these valued resources. By requiring by law that solar farm developers address potential negative impacts, we can have solar farms that align with the Town's goal to preserve rural character.

Bottom line, we want solar farms in our community that do not impact the peaceful enjoyment of living in LaFayette. Therefore, going into our review we considered the balance of interests of three groups of people:

- Town residents
- Property owners (land lessor)
- Solar farm developers (land lessee)

Residents don't want to be affected by the types of potential impacts already mentioned. Property owners want to lease their land for solar farms because the lease payments can help keep the farms in the family and/or can be used to support other parts of their farm businesses. At the end of the solar farm's life, they want their property left undamaged and with all traces of the solar farm removed at no cost to them. Solar farm developers want fair and clear regulations.

We began our research by reviewing what other towns have incorporated in their solar farms laws. To strive for fairness with solar farm owners, it was important our recommendations would be reasonable. Most of our recommendations were borrowed from other towns.

We also added specificity to the law, making it clearer to both applicants and the Town Planning Board. We specified the farms and public scenic vistas that we want to preserve, as identified in the new Comprehensive Plan. We also added objectiveness to parts of the law, particularly with respect to visual impacts, which sometimes can be considered subjective.

Our final analysis yielded recommendations in 13 areas. Most were selected to help protect property owners (*e.g.*, strengthened decommissioning and bonding requirements) and the community (*e.g.*, greater communication about public hearings, larger setbacks, more approvals by the Town, strengthened topsoil and stormwater management and visual impact requirements).

Our next planned article will explain how residents can reduce their energy costs while supporting solar farms in our Town. This is known as Community Solar.