

TESTIMONY OF ELIZABETH BASSETT
To Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee. on S. 191

My name is Elizabeth Bassett. I have lived in Charlotte since 1986. I am a freelance writer who has published in Vermont Life, National Gardening Magazine, and Vermont Sports Today, among other publications. My book, *Nature Walks in Northwest Vermont and the Champlain Valley*, was published by the Appalachian Mountain Club in 1998. Since the mid-1990s I have volunteered for The Charlotte News, our community-owned, non-profit newspaper. I have served as Senior Editor, Contributing Editor, feature writer, and columnist.

I am not against solar energy. Rooftop solar panels on our barn have generated 100% of our electricity for nearly four years. I believe, however, that industrial-scale solar installations should be sited in conformity with our community values and the zoning regulations that support those values.

Charlotte Solar is a 2.2-megawatt, industrial-scale solar installation of 8,250 solar panels. It is being built in a rurally zoned scenic setting close to our home. The Charlotte Solar project will take us as much land as a parking lot for 2,000 cars. Because of the contours of the terrain in our region, the project's 15 acres of metal will be visible for miles. The project sits just one hundred feet from and is fully visible to a neighborhood of homes. The project will also be visible to the thousands of people who drive and bike along Hinesburg Road every day.

My husband and I were part of a group of neighbors that received party status in the Public Service Board's permitting process for the project. We hired an attorney to fight the placement of Charlotte Solar in our midst. Tens of thousands of dollars and months of anger and frustration later, we achieved almost nothing. At best the project will cover 14 rather than 15 acres (panels more tightly packed) and a wire fence will replace the proposed chain-link fence.

What I want to make clear to your committee today is that Charlotte's Town Plan and zoning, if taken into consideration, would have prevented the siting of a large, industrial-scale installation like Charlotte Solar in our neighborhood.

Charlotte's Land Use Regulations state that the Rural District, in which this project is located, is designed to "protect important agricultural land and promote viable agriculture, *scenic vistas and views*, open spaces, and other significant natural, cultural, and scenic resources identified in the Charlotte Town Plan."

Charlotte has a thoughtful Town Plan and zoning. Those who drafted the Town Plan and zoning regulations did not anticipate the exemption under Section 248 of this 15-acre solar factory in a rural zone.

This does not mean that large solar projects could not be sited and built in our area. Charlotte and nearby towns have commercially zoned and light industrial areas that are more suitable for an industrial-scale solar installation.

The entire PSB process was an affront to us. Charlotte Solar made inaccurate statements about the aesthetics of its project. There was no way to counter their claims without citing town zoning or the town plan.

The PSB public hearing in Charlotte was an insult to our entire community. Scores of people attended and all but one spoke against the project. Several landowners offered their land for the project, out of sight of neighbors and passersby. We later learned that such hearings are of absolutely no value as they cannot be considered as evidence in the Board's formal, quasi-judicial permitting process. Our conclusion was that the Section 248 process disregards our community values, established laws, and social compact.

Charlotte was at a loss to protect itself or to prevent the “PSB” from ignoring the long-held values and intentions of our Town. Quality of life and the value of neighbors’ homes will be diminished for at least a quarter century.

Industrial-scale solar installations can be sited thoughtfully. There is a solar project of similar size, 2.2 megawatts, on Dubois Drive in South Burlington. It is nearly impossible to see the panels except for from one spot on Walker Hill Road.

S. 191 is a well intended bill but it will address only some of the issues facing Vermonters as large solar projects are built in inappropriate settings across our state. S. 191 should increase the power of town plans and zoning bylaws in the Section 248 process.

Electricity can be generated by solar panels above parking lots, along commercial thoroughfares, and on industrial, commercial, and municipal buildings. Inappropriately sited industrial-scale solar projects disregard community norms and values.

Our experience in Charlotte, and that of other towns, demonstrates that developers will not willingly inflict inconvenience or higher costs on themselves. Only regulation, created here at the State House, can insure that the decisions that developers and the PSB make will benefit all Vermonters.