

Editorial, 3-19

Crisis in siting solar arrays
Could stall industry's growth

With Statehouse discussion dominated this session by the \$112 million budget shortfall and education reform measures focused on consolidation and improving outcomes, energy-related issues have fallen out of the spotlight to the detriment of Vermonters.

The most pressing issue is the process to site solar arrays. The three-person, quasi-judicial Public Service Board has carte blanche decision-making power and has been flooded with solar array applications over the past few years. With increasing public opposition to solar sites that infringe on aesthetics and preservation of the Vermont character, citizens frequently describe the PSB process as rushed, uncaring, stacked in favor of the applicant and woefully inadequate.

The opposition to a 150-kilowatt solar array next to the Basin Harbor Club in Ferrisburgh is the latest manifestation of the public's ire over the sometimes-ruinous aesthetics of these sites and dissatisfaction with the legal recourse available. Similarly, the proposed siting of a 150-kilowatt solar array in New Haven on land just behind Tourterelle restaurant and within 100 feet of another resident's home seriously questions the wisdom of a process that has been fast-tracked by the Legislature and Gov. Shumlin to spur the solar industry.

Surely, the Legislature and the administration agree that the intent of fast-tracking solar development is not to despoil Vermont's rural character, place aesthetic blights next to established businesses that depend on the scenic appeal of their location, or create nightmares for neighbors whose properties would be significantly devalued.

In the New Haven case, for example, Mark and Tina Gilbert contacted SunCommon with an offer to lease a section of their land for a 150kw solar array. Rather than put it directly behind their home, which would block their scenic westerly views of the Adirondacks and those mesmerizing sunsets, the Gilberts want to place the 798 panels, which would be about 12-feet high, behind and off to the side of Tourterelle, which also does a wedding and special events business in their backyard that faces west toward that same scenic view — only it would no longer offer that same sense of splendor with solar panels dominating the westerly horizon.

New Haven resident Marie Gordon is in a worse situation. The edge of the proposed solar array would start about 100 feet from her house, she wrote in a recent letter to the New Haven select board, while also complaining that she received notice of the application just four days before the application was to be filed on March 10, hardly enough time to meet with the solar company and work out any resolution.

Certainly there is a case to make that Tourterelle would face "undue adverse impact" if the project is built as proposed, and the project might be rejected or modified by the PSB. But it is less than ideal when residents and businesses are faced with a significant devaluation of their property and have very little say in the matter. Act 250 was passed to address such concerns and has worked well to those ends, but with solar projects such restraint only applies in the PSB's estimation of those criteria — and, so far, they often have approved solar projects as the state's greater good but at the expense of individual residents or businesses. That's not a healthy long-term premise on which to base Vermont's most promising renewable energy sector.

H.40, a bill in the House that addresses the state's renewable energy policy, largely sidesteps siting issues. That is a mistake the Senate should take up once the bill is in its hands. Without better siting standards, the solar industry will stall amid public outrage, politicians likely will do an about face, and the solar industry will be singing the same blues as is the wind industry — all because they pushed too far, too fast and weren't adequately considerate of their neighbors.

Policies that site solar arrays in conformance with town plans and put a larger part of the power within those communities is the surest way to keep the solar sector in the public's good graces. Hopefully, the Senate will act to do so this session before the die is cast.

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