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Solar energy firms are bringing in their big guns — consulting agencies — to take on the the local little guys — area residents opposed to anyone locating a huge solar field in their backyard.

The Utility Scale Solar Energy Coalition of Ohio hired political consulting firm Remington Road Group, who worked with Purple Strategies to conduct a solar project opinion survey in early January.

USSEC Director Jason Rafeld said they commissioned the survey because they kept hearing from a “small but vocal group” that opposed the 300-megawatt Birch Solar project.

Light Source bp, the company behind the project, is a member of that coalition. USSEC itself was developed in early 2020, and consists of 20 different entities, mainly solar developers. The survey results claim a majority of responders support solar development in the Lima area and statewide. Lightsource bp project Director Shanelle Montana did not respond to a request for comment on the survey.

“We knew Ohioans overwhelmingly supported renewable energy. This poll further shows that not only do Ohioans support solar, but that they welcome it in their communities,” said Rafeld, who said that small but vocal group was in the minority.

“Solar, which Ohioans see as a crucial part of our state’s energy future, will continue to bring economic prosperity to communities across our state.”

Those opposed to utility scale solar projects have taken to social media to organize their messaging efforts. The group has also contacted county and township officials in Allen and Auglaize counties asking for their support.

The survey comes as the local opposition group gains momentum with regulatory legislation. State Senators Bill Reineke, Bob Cupp, Matt Huffman, and Rob McColley are preparing to support legislation that makes solar and wind developers seek a township referendum for larger projects before they can move on through the state siting board for approval.

The legislation is expected to be introduced today (Friday) in the Ohio Senate.

Area residents are meeting Saturday with Cupp and Huffman regarding the legislation. Refeld called the pending bill “an erosion of landowner’s rights and property rights. “It’s not your backyard, it’s the land owners backyard.”

Purple Strategies worked with data collection agency Dynata to conduct the survey with 750 people across Ohio and 150 people in the greater Lima area. Purple Strategies Statistician Erica Goldman said those 150 people reside in Allen, Auglaize, Hancock, Hardin, Mercer, Putnam, and VanWert counties. A disclaimer was added to the survey that the results are not demographically representative.

One of those who received a phone call from Dynata was Jim Thompson, chief organizer for opposition to industrial scale solar projects in the Shawnee area.

“The questions they asked were so misleading and they led people to those answers,” Thompson said.

The Wapakoneta Daily News obtained a copy of the script created by Purple Strategies. One question asked: Which statement comes closest to your own view?

1. Property owners have the right to do what they want with their land. If they want to

lease their land, it's up to them.

2. Birch Solar project would be bad for the state and destroying scenic farmland.

While the survey didn't allow participants to agree with both statements, data showed that 81 percent of people in the Lima area support the right to do what they want with the land.

At first glance, the survey shows about 60 percent of those surveyed in the Lima area support solar development. Those surveyed were given a choice between three statements:

1. I support solar projects and would welcome their development in my community.

2. I support the development of solar projects, but not in my community.

3. I do not support the development of solar projects.

The survey does not mention utility scale projects.

"It's very disappointing to be quite honest. The tell tale sign is they only polled about 150 people in and around Allen County," Thompson said. "That's not a big sample size to draw from. I could give you 200 names in 10 minutes of people who are adamantly against it. As of today our small group is 1,232 people. I wouldn't really call that a small group."

He says they have about 1,000 petition signatures against the project.

"For the Birch Project itself, I believe these results are inconclusive and in error."

Thompson said it is "the latest desperate attempt by Lightsource bp to reset a failing narrative that they and projects such as Birch Solar are welcome in the Allen/Auglaize County community."

He pointed out Purple Strategies served as the company that managed British Petroleum's (BP's) crisis management public relations response during the Deepwater Horizon off-shore oil rig tragedy. Thompson questioned their impartiality and involvement and/or role with the ownership of the Birch Solar development.

Opposition group member Anita Doll took issue with the phrasing of the questions and the 7.5 percent margin of error for the telephonic survey data.

Thompson called the survey "a sham and deceitful."

Lightsource Bp is not the only project on the horizon for the Auglaize County area.

When asked about other proposed projects in the Auglaize County in the coming years, Refeld didn't have direct knowledge but said developers will conduct studies if they have ideas for a new project.