

BY BOB TOMASZEWSKI
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Ohio House Speaker Bob Cupp and Senate President Matt Huffman were keynote speakers on Saturday during of a presentation on solar regulation; the program was organized by local activists Against Birch Solar.

Ten additional groups were in attendance via Zoom, including Citizens for Clear Skies in Van Wert, concerned citizens from Preble County, citizens for Green Acres in Greene County, and Citizens against Union County Solar. Also represented were groups from Darke, Erie and Franklin County.

Cupp said the power landscape in Ohio is changing.

"We all laugh that Ohio doesn't have enough sun to be able to produce electricity with solar power. All of those things are changing, " he said.

Coal-fired power plants are being shut down and being replaced by natural gas and renewables.

Cupp said some companies are requesting wind and solar energy as a condition of moving into a community. He wanted to hear the resident concerns and also encouraged people to raise their concerns to the Ohio Power Siting Board.

Huffman said he remembered being on Lima's city council and voting to vacate High Street so St. Rita's could expand. For some it was an unpopular decision, but it reminded Huffman of the core ideologies in the local solar conflict.

"Why should somebody be able to tell you what to do on your property?" he said. "We agree that our government is going to be able to come in and enforce zoning regulations for land use."

He said the OPSB had the power it does because creating and transmitting energy was too important to keep local and individual interests from stopping it.

"We have to be able to turn on the lights we have to be able to heat our homes," Huffman said.

He said OPSB was created as part of a legislative energy package but added solar and wind don't belong in the same category as other energy sources. Almost 100 percent of electricity is coal nuclear power and natural gas; wind and solar make up the remaining five percent.

Huffman said the idea was Ohio was going to have a lot of electricity created by solar and wind and they were going to be exempted for zoning because it was so important to create the electricity.

"The problem is we've been at this for 12 or 13 years and that hasn't happened," Huffman said.

He said solar and wind should be in a separate category and be subject to local zoning. Huffman believes it all comes down to a land use question, and the price for that is too high.

"If the price of getting those folks to move to Ohio is destroying the countryside in western Ohio, I'm not going to support that," Huffman said.

Julie Johnson, an activist from Champaign County, said she has spent more than 12 years committed to giving local citizens the right to have a voice in siting renewable energy utilities. She said preparations of bills in both the Ohio House and Senate were signs that things will be moving forward.

"We should understand that if you do not live within the foot print of a project or on property abutting the project, then you have no standing at the Ohio Power Siting Board to intervene in a project and express your concerns and your issues," she said. "If a developer is aggressively seeking to sign good neighbor agreements with the abutting property owners, it may be to conflict them out so they will not have standing to raise issues with the Ohio Power Siting Board. Just something to think about."

She said when it came to a wind project her county and five impacted townships filed to intervene and it made "no impact whatsoever."

Johnson said relying on local governments to protect the interests of the community no matter how much they want to do that is almost impossible.

"The issue is a land use issue and how a community envisions its future. The Power Siting Board has no authority to base decisions on your land use plan," she said.

"Claims made by a developer and the burden of disproving them falls on you. The cost to mount a challenge to an application is beyond the capacity of most local communities."

Johnson said this is a reason to provide an avenue through a referendum.

She said about a third of leaseholders are absentee landowners. She questioned why those landowners would be able to undermine a land use plan.

Attendee Rachel Vonderhaar, said, "Two years ago I was one of you, that was getting stunned by proposed projects — two projects six miles apart."

She said it seemed overwhelming.

In Preble County they also created a citizens group.

"We had to narrow down what concerns were most important to us, that we would have a standing to have a conversation at the Ohio Power Siting board," she said.

The accountability going forward depends on the type of site certificate granted. She also said groups need to file motions to intervene to be included in that site certificate process.

"If you're going to have a water issue 10-20 years from now you need to have authority to get to speak on it," Vonderhaar said. "It's like a dogfight."

She said county commissioners and engineers, township trustees, as well as the soil and water district and county auditor should be included in the conversation about local energy projects and site certificates. She said site certificates with less restrictions tend to have a higher value and are more likely to be resold to a different company.

She encouraged people to look at feasibility studies for their projects.

"I want to know that a project is feasible. I want to know that it's not a parking lot for tax credits sitting next door to me that I am then going to be picking the burden for later."

She said they wouldn't see change in the process until the statehouse takes action.