

BY BOB TOMASZEWSKI
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Amid the questions and heckling from the large crowd gathered at the Apollo Career Center Wednesday, officials from Lightsource bp outlined their plans for the Birch Solar Field Project, which is proposed for 2,600 acres of farm ground in Auglaize and Allen counties.

The No. 1 concern? How it would impact property values, followed closely by any planned expansion, the environmental impact and the company's profit margin. Lightsource bp CEO Kevin Smith and Development Director Shanelle Montana answered questions for more than two hours after a 45-minute presentation on the project.

Devin Swiegart, who lives in Shawnee, said "I wouldn't buy my home if I had to look at this. My house was recently appraised for a good amount, what about the equity that I built in my home?"

Montana said they would continue to look for ways to limit the impact to those in the area and said it would be a continuing conversation.

Smith said there weren't any studies that definitively said it has a negative impact on property values, which prompted heckling from the crowd.

"I'm not going to say that there isn't going to be an effect on your property values; that is one of the reasons we are offering a program for adjacent land owners," Smith said.

When Swiegart asked about whether they would expand, Montana said there were no current plans but that other farmers in the area are approaching solar companies.

"They want solar in their community," Montana said.

Cassie Thomas lives on National Road and asked if Smith would buy a \$400,000 home in the country surrounded by solar farms with a young family.

"You're talking to the wrong guy because I am a huge renewable energy supporter," Smith said, maintaining that they were safe. Thomas retorted asbestos was also considered safe for awhile too.

Smith explained that Poly Silicon panels have been around for at least a decade.

Thomas asked if he would give them a property valuation guarantee.

"I want numbers, I want data," Thomas said.

"To guarantee property values for 30 years, it doesn't work," Smith said.

Over the course of property discussions

Smith said he believed compensation to adjacent landowners would provide protection for changing property values.

Several environmental concerns were also heard at the meeting.

Jack Miller, on Hume Road, was concerned about the safety of his family and potential contamination. He said there was an instance in Winchester, Kentucky where panels contaminated the ground. He said the jobs that would be brought in weren't real jobs, when compared to opportunities at the nearby refinery. Miller was also concerned about maintaining the land.

"We've got a beautiful area here and we don't want you guys here," Miller said.

Smith explained how panels were tested for leaching. He said there would be no hazardous chemicals used in the Birch Solar project.

Miller also was concerned about electromagnetic fields, and Smith said "Any EMF from

a solar facility at the road is less than what you are getting from the equipment in your house,”

Smith assured him that the entire facility would have negligible effects at the road.

“That’s not true; yeah that’s a lie,” Miller responded.

Deborah Longmeier of Wapak Road was concerned about her well. Smith assured her there wouldn’t be contamination and said people wouldn’t be putting solar panels on their roofs if there an issue.

“There are plenty of studies that show that these panels do not create hazardous waste,” Smith said, adding the steel, glass and silicon in the panels were safe.

When confronted about profit by area resident Andrew Golden, Smith explained that after 20 years they would break even, and would make an estimated \$6.5 to 7.5 million each year after that point.

Duchouquet Township resident Anita Doll asked about how many other projects they had of a similar size.

“The Texas project is probably around 1,500 acres,” Smith said.

“Of the ones that you have in similar size, how many are located around such densely residentially populated areas? I am not a farmer; I’ve got four acres, I got a pond,” Doll said.

Smith said they have projects around the world.

Doll said other countries have stricter requirements for alternative energy.

“What you can’t get by with there, you could get by with here,” Doll said.

Smith said they were a small portion of the solar industry.

“There will be 20,000 megawatts built in the U.S. in this year,” Smith said. “Solar is going in everywhere.”

He said roof-top projects were much more expensive.

Doll took the company to task for planning a meeting during the pandemic restrictions.

“You mentioned community support. We’re in the middle of a plague. You realize this area is red — look out here at how many people are putting their families at risk. You can’t scare me easy and you got me scared,” Doll said, “because I don’t trust you.”

Montana explained they chose the Allen/Auglaize area because they have infrastructure in the area necessary for the project. Agricultural land is suitable for use and that there a need from area businesses for energy.

Doll asked about tax rebates. Smith explained that while they aren’t pursuing tax rebates they will be pursuing a payment in lieu of taxes. He also said that they would be pursuing tax credits for the project.

“You can audit our books if you like,” Smith said.

Shawnee resident Samuel Swiegart was skeptical about where the power was going to go and the tax subsidies.

“This power will go into the PJM grid here, frankly the way electricity flows, it gets absorbed by the closest players,” Smith said. When asked if they were working with Amazon distribution, Kevin said they are working with a corporate player.

“In my understanding it’s not fueling a distribution center,” Smith said amidst heckling from the crowd.

Swiegart wanted to know why 2,600 acres was included in the lease agreement when only 900 acres would be used for solar panels. Smith explained it was about preservation. Swiegart was suspicious about future expansion.

“That site we are not going to build more panels on,” Smith said. He said measures would be in writing in their permit application.

While the company’s presentation showed photos of solar panels a half-mile from the edge of a road, plans for the local project show some homes will be much closer to the installed panels.

Smith said there are requirements for setbacks from roadways and houses.

Montana said they would be able to provide more examples from around the area. She also said they would have a 300-foot setback from any homes. Smith explained the setbacks were part of why they leased the large area

A woman who lives on Breese Road was concerned about her view, her property values and the effects of the project in a highly populated area as well as damage to wildlife and the surrounding environment. She was particularly concerned about the hunting grounds of eagles. She claimed the noise could reach 65 decibels, which Smith disputed. He said the noise level should be below 50 decibels. The woman was also concerned about heat islands created by solar panels, which would potentially raise the cost of cooling her home.

Smith said that the multiple studies she cited were “way overblown.”

Jim Thompson who also lives on Breese Road, wanted clarification on stormwater protection. Smith assured there would be protections for both runoff during construction and during operation.

Thompson asked how their plan would be different from a project in Hardin County, which did not include as much room for spacing. Smith explained that solar projects typically have a 40 to 50 percent ground cover ratio.

Thompson also asked about Tier 1 and Tier 2 reporting to the Environmental Protection Agency. Smith said there were no hazardous materials in the solar panels.

Thompson asked if any members on the Ohio Power Siting Board worked during Permitting Attorney Chris Pirik’s tenure on the board. Pirik said the chairman and senior staff are all different from when she worked and that new people come to the board all the time.

“The landscape is constantly changing,” Pirik said, adding the facts of the project would be provided in their 5,000 page permit.

Thompson said he was skeptical because of the scandal with former Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder.

Dave Belton, a Shawnee Township trustee, explained his concern about transparency over whether it was OPSB or Lightsource bp who requested a virtual meeting. Pirik explained that OPSB had requested they meet virtually due to COVID which prompted a related motion from Lightsource bp.

He also wanted to know the full tax amount compared to the payment in lieu of tax.

Montana said the PILOT program amount could range between \$73 million and \$94 million. She said without that program the amount they would be paying is roughly \$110 million.

Mary Hilary of Bowsheer Road told officials she didn’t trust them after a wind energy company had tried to set up in the area in 2012. She said the issues with British Petroleum from 2010 were still there.

Other concerns from area residents included removing farmland, security and additional concerns about property values and layout of the panels.

Smith said Lighsource bp was following the opposition's comments on Facebook and would work to address concerns as best as they can. He said it is difficult to perfectly site the project, but that they would minimize the impact.

Montana said she recognized it is a change in the community and they need to continue to have conversations about the impact.

A virtual meeting will be held Nov. 20 and on Nov. 23 from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Participants can dial in at 1-877-229-8493. The access code is 120041#.

Alternatively the meeting can be accessed at www.birchsolarvirtualpublicmeeting.com.