

BY BOB TOMASZEWSKI  
STAFF WRITER

Allen and Auglaize county residents continued asking questions about the impact — environmental, historical and financial — of the proposed Birch Solar Project. Light Source BP officials presented information Friday evening for a little over an hour before taking questions submitted over the phone and online. The on-line meeting lasted well past 10 p.m.

Those who called in were passionate in their dislike for the project.

Linda Beckstead and others asked why Lightsource officials located the project in such a populated area.

Development Director Shanelle Montana explained they are looking for transmission access, demand for power, project partners and agricultural land.

She said some areas were taken out of the project because there are a number of homes there; she added landowners are interested in the long-term lease agreements.

Deborah Longmeier asked if 100 percent of farmers in the proposed area have signed up. Montana said no, but the majority have — and the acreage they need is available.

Longmeier also asked when commissioners were first contacted. Montana said they were contacted around the end of September to early October.

Longmeier was also concerned about what would happen to the value of her property.

"How much will it go down; you kind of talk around in circles, but you don't really break it down. How much is my property value actually going to go down?"

Montana said there isn't a direct link to property values and solar projects.

"In a lot of areas where these projects exist, we are not seeing a decrease in property values."

She said they are engaging in the community to talk about minimizing the impact and including adjacent landowner payments.

"There isn't a good study out there that really says, this is what's going to happen," Montana said.

Beckstead had asked about benefits to the community and affected homeowners.

Montana said the proposed \$2.7 million payment in lieu of tax would be more than the agricultural tax amount that would normally be paid. She claimed the project would drive down utility prices as they are a cost-competitive company.

Jill Barnes asked about the field mice that are prey for owls and eagles.

"You will be disturbing their hunting grounds." Barnes said, adding she was also concerned about falcons and wood peckers.

Barnes claimed toxic gases would be released if panels caught fire. Barnes was also skeptical about payments to adjacent land owners. Barnes said through her research, those up to 3 miles away could lose 17 percent on their home values and that those up to 10 miles away would lose 7 percent.

"They say they can't find (studies); a little housewife in Ohio was able to find that," Barnes said. "What is it they are not telling us?"

She was also concerned about historical preservation. She compared it to the Crescent Dunes project and asked about impact of solar radiation. Smith said the technology in the two projects were different.

Courteny Dohoney, a consultant from Stantec, addressed the environmental impact.

She said the area would still be used for grazing and would support local wildlife. Beckstead had also asked about which studies are being conducted for the project. Environmental Affairs Vice President Alyssa Edwards said, all properties over 2 acres are subject to the clean water act and that there are permitting requirements for stormwater, sedimentation control and water quality.

Robert Staller asked about a military fort a few miles from the proposed site and relics that may be found in the area.

Dohoney said they complete archeological surveys on the project's footprint, which would identify sensitive resources in the area.

Staller asked about deterioration. Lightsoucre bp CEO Kevin Smith responded, noting over the life of the project the output of the panels degrade about .5 percent a year over time. He said during decommissioning they would then work with the land owner to return the land to its previous state and recycle the panels.

One resident was concerned with setbacks for roadways. Other concerns were caring for trees and shrubs.

Engineer Steve Barnes said they would work with local companies to find plants that are used to the climate for visual screening.

William Walter asked about the timeframe for the process. Montana said they are in the pre-application phase. Permitting is expected to take about nine months into the end of 2021. The project would then enter construction in 2022.

Jim Thompson asked if officials had looked at the Shawnee Township Comprehensive Plan. He said the plan calls for a balance between agricultural land use and township growth, and to ensure the rural character of the township.

Montana said it fits fairly well within the comprehensive plan as they are able to reincorporate agriculture into the project. They are able to ensure woods and wetlands are remaining in the area. She said they were putting panels on already disturbed land and maintaining agricultural elements as well as pollinator habitats.

Smith maintained it was an alternative use for the land as the next generation could decide that they don't want to farm.

Robert Violet asked about winners and losers.

"As consumers I think we will all lose out of this," Violet said.

He asked for data about efficiency.

Smith assured him it was open competition in the market and that long-term contracts help keep economic stability. Smith also said there was "a tremendous amount of data about efficiency."

Violet asked if they could abandon the project after 10 or 15 years. Smith said they would have multiple contracts in place related to selling electricity and an upfront investment of millions of dollars. He said it would be a "very unlikely scenario."