

POLITICS & POLICY

Rural Texans Hope to Derail a Proposed Battery-Storage Site in the Heart of Wine Country

Gillespie County residents and officials have united to oppose a solar farm and battery-energy storage system they say would disrupt an idyllic slice of Hill Country that relies on tourism.

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Texas Monthly; Getty; Solar Farm: Brandon Bell/Getty

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Six miles outside the tourist hot spot of Fredericksburg, past idyllic vineyards, wildlife trails, and ranches, visitors turning onto Country Creek Lane are greeted by a rectangular red sign propped up against a fence: “Stop Dangerous Solar/BESS in Gillespie Co.” Nearly every yard on the mostly residential street, home to eighteen families, has a smaller red sign with the same message.

Here, between the rolling hills and clear streams that locals say their tourism-heavy economy depends upon, hundreds of residents have united in opposition to a roughly thousand-acre solar farm and accompanying battery-energy storage system—BESS, for short—called the Marshall Springs project.

John Love, a father of two, has lived on Country Creek Lane for nearly a decade and become a leader of the opposition movement. In October, he started Fight FBG Solar, a group dedicated to halting the project’s construction. As of September, its Facebook group has amassed nearly five hundred members. The development, located in the Marshall Springs neighborhood, is still in its early stages—the site developer, Ampyr Energy, has a lease for a local family’s land and has secured an interconnection agreement, but it has yet to file a formal application with the county. Residents who oppose the development believe it’s just a matter of time.

The development in Marshall Springs is part of a larger trend, as rural parts of Texas become prime real estate for those seeking to build data centers, solar and wind farms, and battery-storage sites. Battery storage, in particular, has skyrocketed in recent years. Earlier this year, Texas surpassed California to become the country’s leader in battery-storage capacity. As of August, that capacity is 18,275 megawatts—enough energy to power over 3 million homes—according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. BESS sites play a critical role in stabilizing the state’s power grid, releasing

stored energy when demand exceeds supply and intermittent energy sources go offline—Texas currently has **255 utility-scale BESS sites**, including 55 built last year. These consist of rows of large metal containers or blocks filled with lithium-ion battery racks, paired with cooling fans, battery inverters (which convert electricity into usable form), and transformers (which transfer electricity from one circuit to another).

In 2021, a winter storm caused a days-long failure of the Texas power grid, leaving at least 246 people dead. In response, lawmakers approved bills to overhaul the electric grid and prioritize reliability, such as that year's Senate Bill 3, which required power plants to weatherize, making them able to withstand extreme weather events. Battery storage, energy experts say, is part of this solution, providing power when the grid is most strained. In September 2023, energy stored by BESS powered around 434,000 homes and helped avoid grid failure amid record heat, **according to the comptroller's office**. Environmental and energy experts say the alternative, natural gas peaker plants—power plants that run in times of high demand—are expensive, polluting, and inefficient, though the state incentivizes those developments through grants from the Texas Energy Fund, a multibillion dollar initiative to strengthen the grid through reliable power sources.

The benefits of BESS, in other words, are spread across Texas, distributed among all those who live on the ERCOT grid. Those who live near the sites, meanwhile, are grappling with fears over what they see as irrevocable change to the sprawling, rural places they love. Shelly Gibbens, who lives down the street from the proposed development, worries it could reduce the value of her patch of property, which has been in her family for six generations. Jean Webber, a Marshall Springs resident of 26 years, fears it could threaten local wildlife—the deer, jackrabbits, and turkeys that roam the neighborhood. Many fear negative effects on the environment, especially those caused by battery fires and thermal runaway, a chemical chain reaction in which an increase in temperature causes a system to generate more heat, which can lead to the release of toxic chemicals into the environment.

Some of these concerns are hypothetical—BESS facilities are relatively new, and residents wary of their incursion have little information to go off. But the potential for battery fires, the most-cited concern among residents I spoke to, stems from previous documented incidents. It is also the primary focus of an injunction lawsuit against the developer, which the county filed in the 216th District Court earlier this year.

While battery fires remain rare—less than **2 percent** of installations have a malfunction, per the state fire marshal—there have been a handful of high-profile cases in recent years. Several residents I spoke to cited California’s Moss Landing incident, one of the world’s largest battery fires. In January 2025, the Vistra Moss Landing Energy Storage Facility caught fire, sending heavy metals into the atmosphere. While the EPA said the fire posed no risk to public health, many locals reported health issues—rashes, sore throats, and headaches—according to *Inside Climate News*. Carey King, an energy researcher at the University of Texas at Austin, told me such instances are rare and fires can often be prevented by properly clearing vegetation.

Battery-storage-site regulations have also changed since the Moss Landing incident. The Moss Landing facility’s outdated indoor arrangement and battery chemistry made the site more dangerous than newer BESS developments, **Inside Climate News reported**. BESS facilities are now required to comply with updated safety standards, which mandate regular inspections and require thermal-runaway protection. Operators must also develop their own emergency operations plans. The state, too, has adopted strict fire-safety standards for battery-storage facilities. In a February meeting with Fight FBG Solar leaders, an Ampyr spokesperson said the BESS modules used for the Marshall Springs project will be safer than those used for the Moss Landing site. Ampyr representatives did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Lynn Bizzell, fire chief of the Fredericksburg Texas Fire Department, which serves the county at large, told the Fredericksburg city council earlier this year that the planned facilities would impact the department economically, professionally, and emotionally. The remoteness of the area makes

combatting fires an extra challenge, he said. “The first 24 hours, we’re pretty much on our own, until those resources can be brought together and brought in,” Bizzell said. And the county is no stranger to fire. In 2025, Country Creek Lane residents evacuated because of the Crabapple Fire, which burned nearly 10,000 acres within the county. Webber recalls bright-red fire retardant covering parts of her yard for weeks after.

The protocol for fighting an electric fire differs from that for a typical fire. Because of the conduction, firefighters can’t put water directly on the site. Instead, they are instructed to wait until the electric department gets there and shuts off the power before extinguishing the flames. “What we would do from a response perspective is protect the areas around it,” Bizzell said. “We would be putting water on the areas around it to keep the other areas from catching fire.”

For some who call the Texas Hill Country home, what they perceive as the intrusion of industrialization into their picturesque slice of the state is unfathomable. “Why would you put this size of a project here in the middle of this state’s burgeoning wine-industry area? And why put it in the best tourist destination in the state? I mean, it doesn’t make any sense,” Love told me over the phone. When I met Love at his home, I was greeted by a blown-up map of the planned site that curled over the sides of his table. Love joked that when he sleeps, his dreams revolve around the site too.

Love worked in energy-development construction for more than fifty years, managing renewable-energy projects such as gas-to-energy facilities, which capture methane and convert it to usable energy. He’s been retired for five years but joked that his retirement ended when he got involved in combatting the Marshall Springs project. “There’s some people that are very stressed about this,” Love said. “I felt an obligation to get organized and give some people at least some idea of how they can go forward and some sense of hope.”

Love has hosted two educational community meetings at his home and helped plan a town hall at the Fredericksburg United Methodist Church. The first meeting was small, attended mainly by Love’s neighbors, but by the time

the second one rolled around, word of mouth had captured the attention of other concerned residents. The town hall brought people from all across the county. Love also coordinated a meeting with representatives of Ampyr, where he connected with the project's director.

This swathe of the Hill Country has faced similar industrial developments before, and residents mobilized in opposition then too. In 2007, landowners in Gillespie, Llano, and Mason counties came together to oppose wind farms in Gillespie County. They formed a group, called Save Our Scenic Hill Country Environment, and successfully shut down a wind farm in the northern part of the county. “None of us are necessarily opposed to renewable energy,” said Tim Lehmberg, who served as the group's director for eight years. “We feel like there's a place for that and a reason for that, but we just don't feel like the Texas Hill Country, particularly the central portion of the Hill Country here, is a good spot for things like that.”

Some, like those affiliated with the Fight BESS Texas—a group focused on stopping proposed BESS developments across the county, including in Marshall Springs and Harper—believe BESS sites have no place in the state of Texas. They've also rallied in opposition to another, smaller BESS site in the county, Rogers Draw Energy Storage, which inked a lease and an interconnection agreement in 2024. Others, like Love, simply wonder: Why here?

Gillespie County itself has few avenues to take tangible action. The state gives counties little regulatory power, including for industrial projects like BESS plants. Still, county officials—who unanimously oppose the development—are doing what they can.

Gillespie County has passed several resolutions to halt the project, including one broadly against BESS sites in Gillespie County and one that barred the developers from carrying out vegetative clearing until they had the required permits for floodwater and fire codes. These regulations are the same for any other commercial development, though. The city of Fredericksburg and the

county's Economic Development Commission adopted similar resolutions targeting the Marshalls Springs project. "It doesn't carry any enforcement. It's essentially a formal public statement," said County Judge Daniel Jones, who added that nobody except the developer has come to him directly in favor of the project.

"This is sort of a Wild West of an industry, and it's popping up all over the state, and so counties are having to be creative in the ways that they try to approach them," Jones said. "Some counties want these, and that's fine. We don't particularly think they're a good fit for our county, and that's why we're taking the approach that we are." Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, and Lamar counties have welcomed BESS sites into their neighborhoods, viewing the development as something that could boost their infrastructure and economies by creating construction and operational jobs and generating tax revenue.

In March, the county filed its injunction against Ampyr in yet another attempt to bar the project from continuing, citing "public health, safety, welfare, and property of its residents and to enforce its duly adopted ordinances." Ampyr filed a motion to dismiss, which Judge Pat Patillo ruled against last week. An injunction-relief hearing is set for Sept. 29.

At the state and federal level, a few officials have become involved. U.S. Representative Chip Roy has sent multiple **letters** to Ampyr demanding the company answer questions about the specifics of the project; he sent one in November 2025 and another in February. State Representative Ellen Troxclair, who represents the county, proposed two bills to regulate energy storage in Texas during the last legislative session; one would give cities and counties zoning power over certain electric-energy-storage facilities, and the other would require developers to obtain permits from the Public Utility Commission before constructing a BESS site. The bills did not pass.

But the Legislature, like the county, only has so much power to stop this individual project; any BESS-related bills will undergo consideration in spring 2027, when the next legislative session begins. Now, opponents say the court of public opinion may be the only way to get Ampyr to back off and

abandon the site. There's no promise the project won't continue, but for them, it's worth fighting.

"I think [for] anybody, their knee-jerk response is, that's just going to be very unsightly. It's going to be noisy, there's going to be light pollution, but it goes much, much, much deeper than that," Gibbens told me. "This is generational land. I'm the sixth generation that has been in the family, and it's not just going to affect me. It's going to affect my kids, their kids, their kids' kids. It won't be the same piece of land anymore."