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Solar company seeks to override Washington county's law

By DON JENKINS Capital Press

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Chat

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Idaho Power wants to pay solar farms based on the value of the electricity at the time it is provided to the grid.
Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press File

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A Canadian company has asked the state Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council to ~~Chat~~ overrule a Central Washington county and allow a 470-megawatt solar-power plant on farmland.

Quebec-based Innergex Renewable Energy proposes to build the Wautoma Solar Energy Project in Benton County on pastureland and cropland, including 756 acres that are irrigated.

An ordinance passed unanimously in December by county commissioners bars wind and solar developments on land zoned for agriculture.

Commissioners said the county risked being overrun with renewable-energy projects and that a moratorium would give local planners time to develop a siting policy.

The ordinance was passed too late to apply to the Horse Heaven, a wind and solar project that would include 244 windmills and be visible from the Tri-Cities.

Commission Chairman Shon Small said May 19 that renewable-energy projects should be judged individually. He criticized Horse Heaven, but said he supports Innergex's proposal to place solar panes in a remote part of the county.

"I've been talking with them for about six months," Small said. "I think they've been very classy. I'd actually like to see the project go forward."

Washington's renewable-energy law has fueled solar projects in sun-baked Central Washington. Companies have tried to avoid native plants and wildlife by leasing land historically used for agriculture.

Property owners, including farmers and ranchers, have said the leases will provide steady income that makes farming less risky. Farmland conversion, however, conflicts with state and local goals to preserve farmland.

Innergex filed an application with the state site council on May 6. EFSEC made the application public May 18 after initially withholding it until the company deposited \$50,000 for the review.

According to the application, the project would cover 4,573 acres, including roads, maintenance buildings, battery storage and a substation.

The land to be fenced off includes pastures, wheat fields and irrigated alfalfa fields. The solar array would be about 12 miles northeast of Sunnyside in Yakima County.

Innergex opposed the Benton County ordinance. Since it passed, the state council should pre-empt the local law, according to the company.

Innergex said it has lined up leases with landowners and that the solar panels will not interfere with surrounding farms and ranches.

The state site council offers renewable-energy companies a way to bypass counties. The council, made up of state government officials, makes recommendations to Gov. Jay Insee.

In a procedural step, the council has found the Horse Heaven wind and solar project was allowed under Benton County's land-use laws as they were when Scout Clean Energy applied to build it.

Innergex has 80 renewable energy projects in Canada, France, Chile and the U.S. A company spokeswoman said Innergex was attracted to Washington by the state law requiring all electricity to be renewable by 2045.

The company estimates the solar plant would generate enough electricity to power about 70,000 homes, she said. The proposed location is adjacent to a Bonneville Power Administration transmission line.

“Innergex believes in a better world where abundant renewable energy promotes healthier communities and creates shared prosperity,” according to the company's application.

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