



PowerButte: Solar Overlay Zone

Community Workshop Series #2

May 5, 9, and 10, 2016

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

The PowerButte Solar Overlay Zone project held its second set of community workshops on May 5, 9, and 10, 2016:

- ◆ May 5: Lakeside Pavilion in Chico, 14 people attended.
- ◆ May 9: Southside Community Center in Oroville, ten people attended.
- ◆ May 10: Butte College in Butte Valley, eight people attended.

All three workshops followed the same format, which began with an open house during which participants could review the draft approach handout and draft overlay areas map and discuss with County staff. Next, County staff and consultants provided background information about the project and presented the draft approach to the solar overlay zone and its boundaries. Following the presentation, the group shared their feedback on the draft approach and boundaries. Given the small group at the Butte Valley workshop, the presentation and discussion was less formal, with the group sitting around a large table to discuss the material. The overall goal of the workshops was to hear initial reaction to the draft approach from the community for Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors consideration in deciding whether to proceed with this approach and/or potential needed adjustments.

Each workshop began with a welcome and introduction from Tim Snellings, Butte County Development Services Director. The County's consultant then provided background information about the Solar Overlay Zone project, including its goals and objectives, the policy and regulatory background, and its process and status. The County's consultant then presented the draft approach, including the four draft boundary areas within the county, each of which would entail different permit requirements, as well as preliminary standards for utility-scale solar facilities that would become part of the County's Development Code. Participants asked questions about the definition of "utility-scale," the role of and County coordination with PG&E on this project, the makeup of the Stakeholder Group (including a request to include representation from the California Native Plant Society), how the project relates to the Butte Regional Conservation Plan, and how the project would account for conservation easements on individual parcels.

Following the question-and-answer periods, County staff and consultants facilitated a large-group discussion to gather feedback on the draft approach. The following is a summary of the community feedback:

◆ General Overlay Zone Approach

- Most participants generally supported the concept of streamlining utility-scale solar facilities and incentivizing the leasing of land to solar energy developers in the most suitable locations. Community members like the idea of having utility-scale solar facilities in Butte County, as long as impacts are addressed and that they are targeted to appropriate locations.
- Representatives from the solar industry supported the draft approach because it would increase certainty. They believe that streamlining the permit process is important. Once PG&E releases an RFP for a solar project, they want to see that the developer is already far along in the entitlement process.
- Participants commented that the project is affected by and needs to consider the market, the County's relationship with PG&E, and whether the County pursues community choice aggregation (also known as CCA).
- Participants supported the concept of energy independence and community choice aggregation, and they like that this project could support it.
- There was also support expressed for micro-grid technologies that allow for power to be designated for a specific location rather than put into the larger grid.
- Because the cost to tie into the grid is expensive, participants felt that targeting some key locations is a good approach.
- There was a suggestion to consider establishing a countywide cap on the total acreage of utility-scale solar facility projects that the County could permit, which could be increased by the Board of Supervisors in the future if appropriate.

◆ Overlay Zone Map and Boundaries

- One commenter expressed concern about whether the acreage included in the draft suitable and most suitable categories is enough to make the process worthwhile.
- There was a suggestion to consider removing prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, and unique farmland from the prohibited category. There are rice-growing lands that fall into those categories that are unproductive and that could be appropriate for utility-scale solar facilities.
- There were several comments made about removing high fire hazard zones from the prohibited category; potential impacts could be mitigated, and solar facilities shouldn't be prohibited outright.

- One commenter believed that targeting areas within 5 miles of a substation is too large of an area, expressing concerns about needing to construct 5 miles of new transmission lines. Another comment noted that larger projects may be able to construct their own substations.
- There were also comments made about specific locations in the county:
 - The area north of Chico shown as suitable may be within the viewshed of Bidwell Park, which would be a problem.
 - The Vina Plains area along Highway 99 is shown as most suitable, but may have biological and scenic constraints.
 - Southern portions of the county experience localized flooding that isn't reflected in the FEMA flood zones that were used. In particular, areas east of Highway 70 along Bangor and Honcut Roads, including Central House, Lower Honcut, and Middle Honcut to the county line, experience localized flooding. This is an area that is shown as most suitable on the draft map, which may not be appropriate.
 - The topography between the Skyway, Neal Road, and Clark Road may be a constraint.
- There were several suggestions about how to improve map clarity, including showing energy infrastructure and clearly identifying scenic highway overlay zones.

◆ Standards for Utility-Scale Solar Energy Facilities

- There was general support for the concept of using standards to ensure important issues are addressed.
- Several comments expressed the need for comprehensive standards to address visual impacts.
- Several participants called out the draft standard for agricultural parcels that would limit the total site area for non-agricultural uses to 15 percent of the parcel or 5 acres as inappropriate for grazing land, and recommended omitting it.
- There was support for a per kilowatt fee and a point of sale fee for solar panels as part of a community benefits package.
- Any fees collected through the community benefits package could also be used to help support monitoring and enforcement of development standards and mitigation (e.g., monitoring and enforcing visual screening and landscaping requirements, which has not performed for other recent projects). Monitoring should happen more often for the first few years after construction, and then taper off from there.