

## **Comments for Augusta Solar SUP hearing, Feb. 27, 2019**

Nancy Sorrells, Augusta County Alliance  
(540-292-4170 [nsorrells@shenandoahalliance.org](mailto:nsorrells@shenandoahalliance.org))

Thank you for allowing me to speak this evening. My name is Nancy Sorrells (3419 Cold Springs Rd., Greenville) and I come to you both as a “recovering supervisor” who served on the county’s committee to overhaul the comprehensive plan a few years ago and as the county coordinator for the Augusta County Alliance, which is a chapter of the Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley.

The Alliance recognizes what a special place we live in here in the Valley. We stand ready to support our communities as they work to provide a future that protects our land, water, and way of life. Looking at the future of this special place is a little like peering into a crystal ball and trying to discover the right answers. Solar, both small scale and utility scale that sends power back into the grid and then returns it locally through the grid, was barely on the radar screen when I worked on the comp plan back in 2004-2007.

What was true then and today, though, is that good planning is necessary to ensure that our vision of the county protects our beautiful landscape and precious resources such as water and air, and preserves the communities that we hold so dear. That vision also recognizes that good planning policy – the proper balance of industrial, residential, agricultural, and open space lands – must be maintained, and that, even in the areas slated for the most concentrated growth of industry and residential, appropriate buffers and preservation of our natural resources are of top priority. It is further recognized that the plan is a broad-brush vision but that the underlying zoning and landowner rights must be considered.

As you know, large solar projects are popping up across the Commonwealth. On a broad brush examination, that is a very positive

thing – good for the environment, good for our push toward cleaner energy. On the individual level, however, all projects are not equal and there could be detrimental side effects from poorly planned projects. That is why Augusta County is to be lauded for taking the proactive step in creating an ordinance and holding hearings such as this to appropriately consider large-scale solar projects.

The Alliance has actually studied your ordinance and others across the country and developed a fact sheet of what to consider when looking at proposed utility scale ordinance recommendations. I have a copy of this for you. What we have learned is that each project must be weighed on its own merits and siting and not against others in other places.

In looking at all those factors, this project in Stuarts Draft does a good job of meshing with the comprehensive plan, respecting underlying zoning and landowners rights, providing a balance to growth that helps Augusta’s urban service areas avoid becoming the urban sprawl of northern Virginia, and helps protect the vision of the comp plan that recognizes that “Agriculture will continue to be the predominant land use in the county and a major part of the economy.”

Agriculture is, collectively, the No. 1 industry in Augusta and it is an important factor in keeping our taxes low and our quality of life high. Not following the comp plan’s advice for open space, environmental protections, and buffers even in urban service areas, could create the opposite – the quality of life could go down and taxes could go up.

The county has been agriculturally based from its beginning in 1738 and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century our leaders have worked hard to put protections in place to help keep our farms economically viable. To make a living, a farmer has to be flexible and agile and change to meet market demands. The “look” of the farm has changed dramatically since the 1700s. Today, few farmers grow fields of wheat, run free range cattle, operate large scale orchards, or grow flax. But that was once what Augusta farming looked like.

If you think of solar projects as an option to diversify farm income, and therefore keep the farm economically viable, this project becomes quite appealing. In many ways, it beats the alternatives that farmers have turned to in recent decades such as cutting off 5-acre lots-- too small to farm and too big to mow. Also there is nothing to keep water and sewer lines from running underneath the solar panels to adjacent parcels that could be developed.

This project appears to be consistent with what the county's comp plan creates for a vision of quality of life and development in Augusta County. It complements the industrial and residential development of the Stuarts Draft urban service area.

However, this IS a huge construction project, bigger than most. If approved the county must manage the impacts during and after construction. Therefore, should you choose to approve this project, we encourage you to pay close attention to the Erosion and Sediment Control issues. Protecting water has always been paramount in Augusta County. While the developers proffered one E&S employee, we would like to suggest that a second be added during the construction phase to further ensure that our water quality is not impaired.

Also, in keeping with the county's emphasis on agriculture and understanding the connection between viable agriculture and the county's low tax rate and high quality of life, we would ask that you encourage the project developers and landowners to explore and implement compatible agricultural projects around these solar pods – such as grazing sheep, planting pollinator species of plants, and having bee hives. This will also protect and enrich the land and better prepare it for a return to productive agriculture at the end of the project lease.

Thanks again for allowing us to speak and weigh in on this project and the future of solar development in general.