

**COUNTY OF AUGUSTA
STAFF REPORT
ROUND HILL SOLAR
15.2-2232 REVIEW
January 12, 2020**

Community Development Staff Comments:

Round Hill Solar LLC has proposed an 83 MW utility scale solar facility on approximately 880 acres of land approximately 1.5 miles north of Stuarts Draft in the Riverheads District, of which approximately 560 acres are proposed to be developed with solar photovoltaic (PV) panels.

The Code of Virginia requires the Planning Commission review solar energy facilities that are not shown on the Comprehensive Plan and are not allowed in a zoning district by-right to determine whether the **location, character, and extent** of the proposed use is substantially in accord with the Comprehensive Plan or parts thereof. (Code of VA Section 15.2-2232). Location, character, and extent are three important elements that guide the structure of the following staff analysis.

A large solar energy system is a use permitted in the Augusta County Code by a Special Use Permit, to be granted by the Board of Supervisors, in the General Agriculture or General Business districts.

In summary, the proposed solar energy facility requires both an affirmative substantial accord review and an approved Special Use Permit with associated pre-conditions and operating conditions for authorization and subsequent operation.

The staff recommended conditions are essential in the evaluation of this request as it relates to Comprehensive Plan accord and impact to adjacent property owners and the public in general. Staff's review of the substantial accord determination is reflective of these recommended conditions as appropriate.

LOCATION

The Comprehensive Plan, amended August 26th 2020, incorporates 11 policies regarding utility scale solar development. The attached staff report evaluates the project's conformance with those 11 policies. Furthermore, the Comprehensive Plan specifies the expected growth pattern envisioned in the Community Development and Agriculture Conservation Areas of the County within which the project is proposed, which are summarized below.

Community Development Areas

"Community Development Areas are local community settlements which have existing public water or public sewer systems in place or which have relatively good potential for extensions of either of those utilities. These areas are appropriate locations for future low density, rural land uses based upon road access, the existing land use pattern, and proximity to existing public facilities and services, although they are planned to remain predominantly residential in character."

"The development that is expected to take place in the Community Development Areas is expected to be compact, interconnected, and pedestrian oriented while remaining sensitive to the context of the surrounding development as well as the surrounding natural features. Clustered developments would be encouraged in these areas.

As they are existing local community settlements and areas where the county wishes to continue to promote residential development, intensive agricultural operations would not be encouraged to locate or expand in the Community Development Areas.

Community Development Areas are priority locations for:

- Moderate amounts of small scale residential and employment growth at marginally higher densities than in the Rural Conservation Areas
- Limited expansions of public water or sewer service
- Local public facilities
- Small scale, low-intensity commercial and/or light industrial developments” (Comprehensive Plan Update 2014/2015. pg., 9-10).

Agricultural Conservation Areas

“Agricultural Conservation Areas are areas which have mainly farm or forest uses and have generally the lowest overall density of residential uses, have no public water or sewer service, and have most of the county’s intensive agricultural operations. These areas are planned to remain in predominantly agricultural and forestal uses with very little additional residential development.

Any development taking place in the Agricultural Conservation Areas would be expected to be sensitive to the context of the surrounding agricultural areas as well as the surrounding natural features. Such development would primarily be in the form of new dwellings on minor subdivision lots as well as business uses related to agriculture. Clustered developments would not be encouraged in these areas.

Agricultural Conservation Areas are priority locations for:

- Minimal, incremental amounts of very low density rural residential development on individual wells and septic fields
- A full range of long term agricultural, forestry and natural resource industry activities, including intensive agricultural operations” (Comprehensive Plan Update 2014/2015. pg., 11)

CHARACTER

The surrounding character of the proposed request is predominantly agricultural and/or rural residential development on large farm acreages or smaller subdivided lots in General Agriculture zoning.

The proposed solar facility has frontage along the following public roads: White Hill Road (Route 654), Churchmans Mill Road (Route 651), Guthrie Road (Route 652), and Tinkling Spring Road (Route 608).

As identified above, the character of the majority of these roads, are representative of mostly rural landscapes and/or farming landscapes.

The area has a rolling topography, which makes vegetative buffering difficult in some locations. In other locations the placement of panels behind existing topographic knolls may help minimize the impact to adjacent property owners or the traveling public.

The proposed use, with regards to impacts, has two distinct phases. The construction phase and the ongoing operation phase. The construction phase, relatively short, will create a greater land use intensity than the ongoing operations. Staff recommended conditions aim to reduce the negative impacts during construction. As mentioned above the landscape/buffering and established setback may mitigate the ongoing visual impacts in some locations but not all.

While the majority of the project area is planned to remain in agriculture, the portion of the project between White Hill Road and Churchmans Mill Road is in a Community Development Area planned for Low Density Residential development on public water, which may not be compatible with a utility scale solar project. In addition, this portion of the project does present greater visual impacts to the traveling public than other areas of the project.

EXTENT

The proposed facility will be placed on approximately 880 total parcel acres. Substantial accord review as it relates to the extent of the request is somewhat challenging with a solar generating use as proposed. The evaluation of public facilities, i.e. parks, schools, etc., as it relates to extent, is mostly focused on the size of the facility in comparison to the service area.

Comprehensive Plans, although a guide, are relied on heavily by many different governmental departments and sectors as it relates to future planning and investment needs. When a public facility or utility is reviewed for extent, the question becomes, does this proposed facility or utility meet the current, but more importantly, the future demand as is defined in the Comprehensive Plan? This proposed use is not filling a local, public service need, making the determination of extent, from a local land use prospective, problematic.

The Comprehensive Plan, as adopted, does not create a policy, limiting the scope of a single utility scale solar project. However, other than agriculture, there is no other single land use consisting of as many contiguous acres as this project.

SUMMARY

The Comprehensive Plan, with August 26, 2020 amendments, incorporates policies specific to utility scale solar facilities. Based on the analysis of how this project conforms to those 11 policies, which are summarized in the attached staff report, staff feels that the majority of the project, within the Agricultural Conservation Area, is better aligned with those policies than portions of the project designated as Community Development areas, planned for low-density residential development on public water.

The majority of the project does not detract from the development pattern of nearby development areas. The project provides for buffering, although some visual impacts from adjacent property owners cannot be completely mitigated through buffers. The project does not create a significant imbalance of land uses within the immediate community, proposes the use of native vegetation and pollinator species for environmental and aesthetic benefits, and provides for construction jobs and economic diversification opportunities.

In contrast, the project will have an impact on rural viewsheds, especially with the inclusion of the portion of the project between White Hill Road and Churchmans Mill Road, and an impact on prime farmland and production agriculture. In addition, there are existing homes and several buildable lots along Brenneman Lane, east and west of White Hill Road, and north of Guthrie road that will be visually impacted by the project. The area of the project between White Hill Road and Churchmans Mill Road has adjacent low-density residential development, which the Comprehensive Plan envisions continuing along the road

towards the development area South of Staunton. The development of a solar project within this section could create a fragmented development pattern within the designated Community Development Area, impacting the Comprehensive Plan's vision for future development of this area.