

County Tweaks Code to Allow Solar Projects

Amendment Prompted by Proposal for Cuyama Solar Farm

Brandon Fastman, Santa Barbara Independent, 4-14-11

The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to initiate land-use and development-code amendments to allow for both large and small utility-scale solar projects. The amendment was prompted by a proposal from Arizona-based company First Solar to build a 40-megawatt (MW) solar farm near the city of Cuyama. The “initiation” allows for Planning and Development to study the effects of amendments that would allow the building of solar installations both less than and more than 5 MW — about 40 acres in size — on rural land designated as Ag-II. The supervisors would not hold a vote on actually amending the ordinance until completion of the study.

County planner Kevin Drude told supervisors that while the Cuyama project is the only pending proposal, several concerns have approached the county about building smaller solar installations in the past year. The biggest sticking point, however, may be the California Land Conservation Act (commonly referred to as the Williamson Act), which allows landowners to enter into a contract in which they agree to preserve their land for agricultural use in return for lower tax rates. The purpose of the act is to secure food supplies and protect rural land from development. Without the cancellation of Williamson Act contracts, the Cuyama solar project cannot go forward. Attorney Susan Petrovich said that if the board is not willing to at least consider cancellation, they should notify First Solar because there would be no point in further pursuing the project. In regard to the suggestion of county staff, supervisors refused to weigh in on the topic. Frustrated 3rd District Supervisor Doreen Farr did say, “We’ve been boxed in as to what we can talk about.”

Nobody came forward to oppose the solar farm or the initiation, but pistachio farmer Gene Zannon did complain that the facility would use 100 percent of the area’s transmission-line capacity, restricting the possibility of future projects that may be more beneficial to area residents.