

Dueling dim views of solar sites

David Sneed, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 4-30-11

County planning commissioners Thursday clashed over how best to proceed with a 550-megawatt solar farm proposed for the Carrizo Plain.

Commissioners Dan O'Grady and Jim Irving said they prefer a layout that would put the sprawling photovoltaic plant entirely north of Highway 58. Commissioners Carlyn Christianson and Ken Topping prefer a layout that puts the solar arrays on both sides of the highway but avoids protected farmland.

The two sides argued — sometimes heatedly — at Thursday's hearing, the third the commission has held on the project. The tiebreaker, Commissioner Tim Murphy, was absent.

O'Grady, whose district includes the Carrizo Plain, said the northern alignment would keep the 460 arrays a half mile from the highway and the Carrisa Plains Elementary School. Visual impact of the project along with the potential driving hazard of glare from the glass panels are some of his main concerns.

The northerly option, called Alternative 2, was one of several acceptable layout plans outlined in the project's environmental impact report.

"The EIR lists Alternative 2 as a fully valid alternative; there's no ifs and ands or buts about it," O'Grady said. "If it's not a valid option, then the EIR is flawed, and I don't think it is."

Christianson adamantly opposed that option, saying the commission has already spent the last two meetings debating the southerly layout option. Unlike Alternative 2, the southerly option avoids lands under Williamson Act protection.

The Williamson Act gives farmers substantial property tax breaks if they contractually agree to keep their land in agricultural production. Those contracts would have to be broken in order to allow solar panels to be put on the land.

That would require action by the county Board of Supervisors, a step that would further delay the project, which is already on a tight timeline, Christianson said, and would also undermine the county's commitment to protecting its farmland.

Because Murphy had supported the southerly option in past meetings, the commission continued to examine and refine it. Another, possibly final, hearing on the project is scheduled for May 12.

The Topaz Solar Farm would produce enough electricity to power about 160,000 homes. The solar panels would cover nearly 10 square miles. Applicant First Solar hopes to begin construction in September.