

Supervisors pave way for solar, van pool projects

Marga K. Cooley, Santa Maria Times, 4-13-11

Santa Barbara County decision-makers opened the door Tuesday to land-use amendments that would pave the way for both large and small solar photovoltaic projects in the Cuyama Valley.

They did not, however, address whether they would support a partial cancellation of Williamson Act contracts to provide for a proposed 326-acre large-scale solar facility called the Cuyama Solar Array Project.

Also Tuesday, the county Board of Supervisors voted 4-1, with 5th District Supervisor Steve Lavagnino dissenting, to end the North County's AgVAN program and use part of the program's remaining \$1.9 million in grant money to buy 35 vans for a regional van-pool operation called Cal Vans.

AgVAN has provided farmworkers with transportation to and from North County fields since the county received a \$3.1 million grant in 2007, but the operation was not heavily used and proved financially unfeasible. It will end June 30.

The Cal Vans program, which operates in 15 counties and will be available in all areas of Santa Barbara County, is paid for by the people who use the service or is subsidized by employers. As part of the deal, Cal Vans will maintain a staffed satellite office in Santa Maria.

"I see nothing but a win-win here," said 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal. "This is an economic development strategy. We're abandoning the ag program, we're creating a new car pool van program that's available to anyone or any employer, whether or not they provide a subsidy, so they have economical transportation for their employees. This is really great."

Three people spoke on the issue, including Kent Epperson, director of Traffic Solutions, a division of the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments.

"Cal Vans will offer a level of service and a price point lacking in van pools for our community," Epperson told the board.

Epperson also noted the vans will offer a way to ease congestion in commuter corridors or areas that are under construction, such as the Santa Maria River Bridge and the South Coast project to widen Highway 101 through Santa Barbara.

However, Santa Maria activist Paula James challenged the legality of the original AgVAN program, saying that it is used in "aiding and abetting illegal aliens," and described redirecting part of the program's grant money to CalVans as a "money-laundering scheme."

"I'd vote to send the money back to the state of California, where it belongs," she told the board.

In response to James' comment, several of the supervisors noted that the immigration status of people using the AgVAN program is not checked.

"That's important for folks to understand," said 2nd District Supervisor Janet Wolf. "That may be a reason the AgVAN program didn't work."

Andy Caldwell, executive director of the Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business, said that while he didn't disagree with James, there was something to be said for sharing van pools.

He suggested that more people, including the supervisors, share rides when they drive between the South Coast and North County for meetings.

In rare agreement, Carbajal picked up on Caldwell's point saying that if there was a van, he and Wolf "would gladly jump on."

The board also wrangled over whether to consolidate the Parks and Housing and Community Development departments into one department called Community Services as part of move to streamline and eliminate duplicate services and positions.

The move would save an estimated \$500,000 annually in an extremely tight budget year, but the supervisors were not convinced county staff's plan would achieve the desired goals or that the timing is right.

They also expressed concern about eliminating the Parks Department, and whether that would best serve the county.

The consolidation would lump parks, housing and community development, animal services, the Library Advisory Committee, the Human Services Commission and the Arts Commission under one roof.

Animal services would be relocated from Public Health.

The board heard initial public comment on the issue at its April 5 meeting, but held off on a decision because Wolf was absent.

On Tuesday, Wolf likened the consolidation to a marriage between two people who don't have much in common but who want to get together to save money, and said there was not enough information provided by staff on the ramifications or the structure of the plan.

Chief Executive Officer Chandra Wallar defended the consolidation, saying saving money was not the only goal, and that staff was following direction from the board to have departments that are more robust.

She pointed to similar models in San Diego County, where she served as deputy chief administrative officer and general manager over the land-use and environment group before taking the Santa Barbara position in November.

"I suggested Parks be moved to Community Services because I truly saw that as something that would allow us to focus on community services," she said. "While they may on the surface seem somewhat disparate, they aren't.

"They have a unity in their vision and how they interact with the community. That's what I saw, an opportunity to save dollars, but also an opportunity to enhance the function and leverage."

After pleas from several members of Animal Services to keep their department in Public Health, the board gave Wallar a nod of confidence by voting unanimously to move forward with the consolidation, but to leave Animal Services with Public Health.

The vote allows a search to begin for a Community Services Director to head the new department.