

Solar permitting staying the same for now

Elizabeth Varin, Imperial Valley Press, 3-2-11

If it ain't broke, don't fix it, argued solar developers Tuesday morning.

And local officials agreed as the Imperial County Board of Supervisors voted to keep the current solar project permitting processes how they are. But talks will continue about mitigation measures for turning agriculture land into solar fields.

Planning Director Armando Villa brought forward alternatives on how to deal with the relatively new industry in the county. There are certain permitting and mitigation issues that are unique to solar facilities, and the county is still working through some of those, he said.

There's been a lot of interest in developing solar projects in the county, Villa said. Developers have put in applications for more than 10,000 acres in the area to be converted to solar facilities.

Solar energy developers overwhelmingly supported keeping standards as they are, including Tom Buttgenbach with 8minutenergy. The company has already completed a project and has others in the pipeline, he said.

There are always things that can be improved upon, he said. But creating a whole new permitting policy creates a bottleneck, and time is of the essence with these projects.

"We do think the process works," he said. "It is not broken. We do not really see a reason why it has to be fixed."

While some individual farmers and land owners called for no change in regulations, Linsey Dale, executive director of the county Farm Bureau, said the bureau's board members were worried about the possible impact on neighboring farmland. Guidelines need to be established to deal with mitigation funds, dust, glare from dishes and more, she said.

There need to be some changes in the process, agreed Supervisor Gary Wyatt. The policy has come from the planning commission's decisions, but it should be decided by the Board of Supervisors.

Wyatt recommended a task force with supervisors and related county departments to talk about possible mitigation measures and other changes.

Supervisor John Renison agreed with the task force as he made the motion to keep the permitting process the same, but said the process needs to be streamlined. That's the platform he ran on and that's the reason Villa was hired as planning director.