Stanislaus panel OKs 155-acre solar project

John Holland, Modesto Bee, 9-16-11

A solar electricity company won a permit Thursday night to put its panels on 155 acres just north of Modesto.

The Stanislaus County Planning Commission voted 8-0 for the project, delighting supporters who noted its benefits for air quality and construction jobs.

SunPower Corp. of San Jose plans to spend more than $150 million on the project, at McHenry Avenue and Patterson Road. The Modesto Irrigation District has agreed to buy the energy output, which will meet 2 percent of its demand.

The commission vote will be final if it isn't appealed to the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors by Sept. 26.

Several business and civic leaders spoke in support of the project, which will be the county's biggest solar installation by far.

"We think that it is ethically and morally the right thing to do, and we are happy to endorse it," said Elvira Ramirez, executive director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Stockton.

Construction is scheduled to start this fall and run to July. The site will have 44 to 128 construction workers at a time but only two to four employees during operation, a county staff report said.

The Stanislaus County Farm Bureau supported the project but raised concern about using farmland for solar projects in general. The McHenry project would not have passed muster if the land were under the state's Williamson Act, which provides property tax breaks for keeping land in agriculture, Farm Bureau executive manager Wayne Zipser said.

He also objected to the project being called the McHenry Solar Farm.

"Technically, it's not farming," he said. "It's not producing food or fiber."

Other project supporters noted that the land could return to farming after the 25-year lease for the solar panels runs out.

The project will help the MID meet a state mandate to get at least 33 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2020. It has moved close to the target thanks mainly to wind turbines.

The district will pay 17 cents per kilowatt-hour for the solar power over 25 years, about double the current cost of conventional power.

This would prove worthwhile if conventional sources rise in price or regulations force reductions in the use of carbon-based fuels, said Paul McMillan, principal for the utility group at SunPower.