

High Desert residents weigh-in on county renewable energy policy

Joe Nelson, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 3-6-15

SAN BERNARDINO --San Bernardino County residents weighed in Thursday on proposed regulations for renewable energy development as the county prepares new policy to incorporate into its general plan.

High Desert residents and environmental advocates told county planning officials during Thursday's meeting at the county Government Center they want little-to-no large-scale development, more rooftop solar development, and no projects built in residential areas, mainly in the High Desert region where the bulk of renewable energy development is being targeted by developers.

"My bottom line is solar has no place in rural residential neighborhoods," Landers resident Carol Scott said.

The county has already drafted a five-page framework for its renewable energy development policy that will ultimately be drafted into an official document and incorporated into the county's general plan. Among the recommendations include building renewable energy projects in areas that are less desirable for residential and commercial development and will have the least amount of negative impact on the environment, mainly on land in low-lying or low-visibility areas that has previously been disturbed, such as reclaimed mining sites. Ideally, selected development sites should be able to leverage existing transmission networks and distribute power locally.

The county also intends to focus more on small-scale renewable energy projects that address local needs and in which the power can be sold to the grid.

State renewable energy mandates and incentives have prompted an unprecedented number of permit applications for renewable energy projects to flood the county's planning department, forcing the county to strengthen its policies and regulations for such development. The High Desert is one of the most coveted areas in the U.S. being scouted for such development.

A website has been created, sparcforum.org, for interested residents and environmentalists to track the county's progress in the shaping of what the county is calling its Renewable Energy and Conservation Element.

Among those who spoke at Thursday's meeting included members of the Alliance for Desert Preservation, the Desert Tortoise Council, and the Bighorn Desert View Water District and the Mojave Desert Heritage and Cultural Association.

While most of the speaker's encouraged stringent regulations on renewable energy development and as few projects as possible, High Desert resident Vic Johnson encouraged as much development as possible.

"The time for industrial renewable energy is long overdue. We should be erecting millions of wind turbines and oceans of solar farms," said Johnson, of Johnson Valley.

Johnson, however, said there should be a quid pro quo for residents who have to sacrifice their pristine views and possibly see their property values decline,

"This could come in the form of drastically reduced electric bills," said Johnson, who also said the county

should consider requiring developers of renewable energy project to install all power lines underground, and that a requirement should be in place for all hardware used for renewable energy project be manufactured in the U.S., preferably California.

“Renewables are the clean air engines of the future. We need to rev up those engines for the protection of our future generations. It may be our last hope,” Johnson said.

The next phase of the process will be a cost-benefit analysis which will begin in April and likely take until the end of the year to complete, county Planning Director Terri Rahhal said.

“It’ll be an analysis that will help us finalize our policies and standards,” Rahhal said.