

BUSINESS

Suffolk planners approve guidelines for big solar array projects



This massive solar farm, seen here on Saturday, April 4, 2015, is nearing completion along Edwards Avenue in Calverton. Photo Credit: Steve Pfozt

By MARK HARRINGTON

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The Suffolk County Planning Commission Wednesday approved broad guidelines for large, utility-scale solar arrays, even as a large solar developer said the proposed rules would "kill" future projects.

A working group of the commission spent months developing the model code to be used by towns across Suffolk that have been approached to permit large solar-power arrays on large fields.

The code calls for solar projects to be sited on industrial-zoned parcels. It says 35 percent of the project land should remain "natural and undisturbed" and that the panels and related equipment should occupy no more than 60 percent of the lot. The code would not allow the spaces between panels to count as open space.

In a public comment session before the vote, Garrett Gray, an attorney for sPower, which has proposed several large solar arrays on Long Island, said the open space restrictions would "kill every single [utility-scale] solar deal on Long Island" including a proposed sPower project in Shoreham that has stirred significant public opposition.

Commission chairman David Calone dismissed the claim. He noted after the meeting that the solar guidelines were drawn from similar codes across the country, and that solar installation companies helped devise Suffolk's model code.

"The bottom line is if we're going to do this it's going to have to be done with setbacks," Calone said. Developers, he said, "may have to build a slightly smaller project, or buy a little more land."

Planning Commissioner Mike Kaufman disagreed that the code would kill projects, but rather "will guide projects to appropriate areas."

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Suffolk County Legis. Sarah Anker (D-Mount Sinai), who was on the commission's working group, said the model code was important because "towns need guidance" in approving the projects. "What we experienced in Shoreham opened the floodgates of community concern," Anker said.

Brookhaven Town is expected to adopt the voluntary solar code, and other Suffolk towns

are expected to adopt elements of it, Calone said.

The model code also would require that projects not be built adjacent to or within the control zone of any airport, subject to FAA approval, and that they be kept out of 100-year flood zones.

It also calls for a minimum 75-foot-perimeter buffer of natural and undisturbed vegetation around the fenced arrays, and a minimum 100-foot setback from residential dwellings.

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