



Major solar farm development planned off SR 207

By Stuart Korfhage
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There's a massive development likely headed for southern St. Johns County that doesn't involve a single new home or retail outlet.

Florida Power & Light is one approval away from getting started on an 846-acre solar energy operation on what is now a cabbage farm off of County Road 305 near State Road 207.

The first major step in the process occurred Nov. 15 when the St. Johns County Planning and Zoning Agency granted approval for a special use permit for the project. The County Commission will hear a non-zoning variance request Dec. 18, and the project can move forward if the Commission grants that.

Assuming it is approved, it will be the first major solar project in the county, but it will be similar to what FPL has been doing all over the state.

Devaney Iglesias, spokeswoman for FPL, told The Record that the company is planning to open four sites in 2019 after cranking up eight operations this year that can produce a combined 600 megawatts of power.

"It's a huge part of everything we're doing right now," Iglesias said. "The price point right now makes sense for us. Now they are producing hundreds of millions of dollars in (fuel) savings."

She said the technology has improved greatly in less than a decade. She said the company can set up a solar operation now that produces 74.5 megawatts of power — as the county operation will — for about what it spent to outfit a 25-megawatt operation in 2009.

During the presentation to the PZA, Geoff West and Jim Bush with FPL described the projects and the benefits.

Like Iglesias, Bush highlighted FPL's move to more renewable energy sources. However, it's still a small portion of its output for now despite rapid growth.

Bush said the company has gone from importing 40 million barrels of oil for power plants to less than a million now. West added that by 2023, FPL will generate 4 percent of its power needs from solar panels and less than 1 percent from oil.

While most people support solar power generation as long as it doesn't cause a rise in rates, there were some concerns about the local project.

County staff mentioned comments they have received from property owners about whether the solar operation will reduce property values in the area. Others were concerned about possible disruptions at the site.

Iglesias said that once the project is finished, a process that takes 6-9 months, residents will see very little traffic at the site.

"The one thing that we like to say about our solar energy centers is that make great neighbors," she said. "There's no noise, no water, no increase to traffic once construction is complete."

According to county documents, the facility will operate 24 hours a day, generating electricity during normal daylight hours. Maintenance activities will occur as needed. The solar panels will sit approximately 94 inches from the ground and "will not emit any light, glare, smoke, fumes or noise."

Security fencing 6-8 feet high with extension arms of strand barb wire, will be installed at the perimeter of the facility. There will also be a landscape buffer along C.R. 305.

The proposal was welcomed by the members of the PZA, who voted unanimously in favor of the permit.

"I think this is really kind of a slam dunk here," PZA member Jeff Martin said. "It's definitely in an area where it's going to be an asset. It's not going to be invasive to the surrounding property."

Also backing the project is Herb Hiller, co-founder and past president of the St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop Alliance. A new segment of the cycling trail connecting Vermont Heights to Palatka passes right by the solar operation site. And the project is named Trailside Solar Energy Center.

"We like this project because ... solar energy represents a factor in a way that Americans are changing their attitudes on how we live on the land, and (bike) trails do the same, especially destination trails," he said at the PZA meeting."