



Livermore development fight over new major solar farm

By J.K. Dineen, San Francisco Chronicle, November 30, 2020

Developers of the Aramis Solar Energy Generation and Storage Project propose converting 410 acres of grassland, now used mostly for grazing cattle and harvesting hay, into the Bay Area's largest solar farm and battery power storage facility. But conflict is brewing after a 2-0 vote to approve the project at an East County Board of Zoning Adjustments meeting.

"Opponents say the project would gobble up protected agricultural land, decimate the valley's rural character, and threaten important native species like the California tiger salamander and the burrowing owl. Project supporters counter that it would bring good union jobs, millions of dollars in investment, and is a good public use for a piece of private land they consider underutilized.

"With California committed to producing 100 percent zero-carbon electricity by 2045, the sort of fight being played out in Livermore could become more common, said Rob Selna, an attorney representing a group of ranchers and environmental groups opposed to the project.

"It's really a wildlife preserve, in a sense,' said Chris O'Brien, a ranch owner who lives near the project site. 'It's the last valley in the Bay Area that is not developed with housing. And that is because of Measure D.'

"Alameda County Measure D allows wind farms, like the one on Altamont Pass, but doesn't specifically allow solar installations. County planning staff contends that two previous solar projects, one in 2008 in Mountain House and one along the Altamont Pass in 2011, established precedent allowing solar installations.

"But some Livermore residents object to the fact that much of the power generated would not go to the East Bay but rather San Francisco. That's because CleanPowerSF, a renewable energy aggregator administered by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, has entered into a contract to purchase 75 percent of the energy generated. The Livermore City Council has also voted to oppose the project.

"Critics also took issue with the fact that the project is being approved before the county completes a long-awaited study of where large solar development should be located.

"But several proponents of the project countered during the zoning board meeting that the Bay Area has to shoulder some of the solar infrastructure burden."

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