

A Short Solar Synopsis – 2019 – 2021 Regarding MacBeth Solar Design off Sikkenga Road

In July of 2019, MacBeth Solar and Cypress Creek Renewables approached Montague Township with a concept to place a solar farm on property between Sikkenga Road and Business US31 and south of Fruitvale. The initial design called for the possibility of some solar on the west side of Sikkenga as well. MacBeth had been in touch with the landowners and found potential in a working agreement between them.

What brought our township into their spectrum, was not only the State mandated requirement to utility companies to find other renewable energy sources in the upcoming years, but the availability of the high voltage lines that run from the substation on Walsh Road westwardly out to where DuPont and OxyChem used to have their factories.

Our Zoning Ordinance currently did not have any specific wording to address solar farms. When we approached our legal council, they felt that commercial solar farms could be considered “Essential Services”. This term is defined in our Zoning Ordinance on page 8. (A link to our Zoning Ordinance is also on our website.) MacBeth appeared to be a hurry to get some initial approvals done, so they could meet deadlines imposed on them for tremendous tax credits.

The panels were to be single-axis tracking panels, and be “bi-facial”, meaning they can absorb sunlight from the bottom off the snow.

The Planning Committee met many times, all public meetings, to look into the details of the construction. Questions such as the following were discussed in length:

- There would be no glare off the solar panels – designed to absorb light not reflect
- The land is not being sold to the solar company, but leased by the landowner
- There are bonds in place to protect the township, that if they quit and left, there would be money to clean up the site
- Tax implications were complicated and still being discussed at the County level
- Company was will to work with local landscapers and botanists to find proper grass cover
- Setbacks were discussed
- Muskegon County Road Commission must be contacted
- One concern was the visual aspects of this design for the neighborhood. Would it hurt home values? Despite designs for planted trees and wild-life type fencing, how would it look out from a neighbors door?

The Township approved their plans, calling commercial solar an Essential Service, with various contingencies.

In Spring of 2021, MacBeth Solar teamed up with Pinegate Renewables and wanted to continue to move forward. Because of the change of hands, we felt we needed to meet with the companies again.

Two changes were brought to our attention. One being the possibilities of adding large battery containers. These were not in the original plan, so our Planning Commission and Board said no to the batteries. Also, we found out a lot of soil would be moved around and we were under the impression that minimal movement would take place. We again expressed our concerns regarding water retainage in a heavy rain. They said their contours would help contain the flow.

At a March 2021 Planning Commission meeting, the PC approved the site plan presented, with the following requirements

1. Any future discussion of battery placement will require a new meeting with the Planning Commission
2. Newly planted trees must be watered for 2 years, and if they die within 3 they must be replaced
3. Emergency contacts must be on signage
4. Fire Department must be worked with, and FD must be able to have access.

Due to the controversial and largely new concept of commercial solar farms, the Planning Commission has chosen to meet periodically over the summer months of 2021, to discuss adding solar wording in our Zoning Ordinance, and discuss best placement of any future solar farms. These meetings will be posted on-line, on the bulletin board out at hall, and on the door, and they are always open to the public.

Tracy Korthase
Planning Commission / Township Treasurer