

Solar Update

Hecate Energy has identified a 900-acre project area, most of which extends south from the intersection of State Route 23 and County Route 7. Hecate's proposal calls for the installation of 200,000 solar panels to generate 60 megawatts of electrical power, and may also include a group of 53'-long shipping containers housing lithium ion batteries to store electricity.

A large microphone has been placed on the west side of Route 7, just north of Birch Hill Road; a second microphone is located on the south side of Route 23, just west of the intersection with Route 7. So we know that some testing is again occurring.

We DON'T know where Hecate will propose to site the solar panel arrays. We've been told that 500 acres will be needed for the 200,000 solar panels, inverters, and related equipment. Access roads will need to be created. And we still don't know whether Hecate will propose to create an energy storage facility on the north side of Route 23, east of the existing Craryville substation.

It is fair to say that thus far, there have been problems with Hecate's dissemination of information and gathering of local input. Mr. Campbell was quoted in the Columbia Paper, as saying, "Hecate doesn't do projects that don't include local input...we encourage and look for local input...it's just a good way to do business." Unfortunately, however, inaction is speaking louder than words. As I reported at last month's Board meeting, Hecate decided to go back on its written commitment to New York State to hold two in-person open house events before it files its next required document, a "Preliminary Scoping Statement", so that townspeople could meet with Hecate representatives, ask questions about the project, and offer comments and suggestions that might be incorporated into the document. Instead, Hecate mailed postcards to some Copake residents — not all. In fact, some folks who live very near the project area boundaries did not receive postcards. Those who did get a postcard were invited to Hecate's website, a "virtual open house", where they could ask questions and comment. The website now lists exactly seven questions and responses. That's it! The opportunity for Copake residents to consider Hecate's proposal as a group, to learn what their friends and neighbors are thinking, is missing — so far.

Another quote: to meet the state's "aggressive renewables development mandates, projects need to find ways to continue development during these uncertain times." Hecate cites the pandemic and health concerns as the reason to forego the state law's public participation requirements it said it would follow.

We all must remain vigilant and follow recommended health guidelines. We know that the state has been easing group meeting restrictions. The trajectory we seem to be on would suggest that soon it will be possible to have safe, in-person group gatherings. But in the meantime, if it really wants local input, Hecate could host a series of small discussion groups, with appropriate social distancing: mini, in-person, backyard "open houses" to both give information and get feedback about its proposal. Some residents have told me they are uncomfortable attending online meetings (like this one); others have poor internet access, or none at all. Hecate should reach out to these folks — to everyone.

It is not unreasonable to expect Hecate to make more of an effort at outreach. It should wait until Copake residents are able to safely meet with Hecate at in-person open houses, as Hecate promised the state, and represented to the Town of Copake, would happen. Again I ask, what's the rush?

Let me conclude with a quick summary of what the Town Board has been doing.

1. We've previously reported that the town has hired an attorney who specializes in advising towns who are "invited" to be "host communities" for industrial-size solar projects.
2. We soon will hire an environmental engineering firm to assist us in evaluating Hecate's Scoping Statement and to identify potential environmental impacts of the project on wetlands, wildlife, the view shed, and other concerns.
3. We will be applying for what are called "Intervenor Funds" — monies the state law requires be put up by solar developers — to help us defray the costs of professional assistance to protect Copake's interests.
4. We will hold an online town informational meeting on Thursday, July 30 at 7pm, at which our solar attorney will make a presentation.
5. We are planning a large, in-person meeting for Saturday morning, October 3, at the Taconic Hills Performing Arts Center.

Finally, a special edition of the Copake Connection will be dedicated to issues regarding Hecate's proposed utility-size solar project. We will also use social media and other communications to keep everyone abreast of developments as they occur.

Thanks for your interest and your attention, and a special thanks to those of you who have reached out with questions and comments. Please keep them coming.

Richard Wolf
Deputy Supervisor