

# Solar project is too big for Spotsylvania

**A**FTER meeting with both sides and reviewing reams of documents, we've determined that the rancorous year-long debate over a proposed 6,350-acre solar power plant that has pitted Concerned Citizens of Spotsylvania County, a small local grassroots group, against a large, out-of-state corporation comes down to this: the project is way too big for western Spotsylvania County, and there are too few benefits to county residents to offset this major deficiency.

Utah-based Sustainable Power Group (sPower) wants to turn 10 square miles of agriculturally-zoned land that was previously a tree farm into a forest of solar panels, making it the largest solar facility on the East Coast. The company's plan to shield this utility-sized power plant from view with trees and berms doesn't change the fact that it is massive in scale.

Too massive, in fact, for an agricultural zone that abuts a residential area. Which is why the county's Planning Commission recommended that sPower be given a special use permit to erect solar panels only on 245 acres, the smallest of its three connecting sites and also the one farthest away from homes.

Some objections to the 500-megawatt, \$615 million project, including nearby residents' fears that the proposed solar facility would cause major environmental and health problems during construction and its subsequent 30 years of operation, seem somewhat overblown, and more attributable to a Not In My Backyard attitude that is making it harder and harder to erect needed infrastructure pretty much anywhere.

Both sides have hired appraisers who disagree on what impact the solar farm would have on nearby home values, but it seems beyond dispute that solar panels would be quiet, undemanding neighbors. sPower has also committed to spending \$25 million in community upgrades, including replacing aging water pipes in Fawn Lake, although the company admits that these enticements are not legally enforceable.

But sPower's resistance to posting a cash bond or irrevocable letter of credit to protect Spotsylvania taxpayers from what could be an enormous cost of decommissioning and disposing of 1.8 million solar panels containing toxic cadmium telluride at the end of their useful lifespans if the project's multiple limited liability corporations skip out is troubling. So is its insistence that the supposed future recycling value of the spent panels three decades from now be included in its current decommissioning plan.

Related to the project's massive scale—in an area that is much closer to a residential area than most of the

nation's solar facilities of its size—is the fact that sPower has already contracted to sell all of the electricity generated by the proposed Spotsylvania solar facility to power-guzzling tech giants Apple and Microsoft, as well as the University of Richmond.

Microsoft, which already has a data center in Loudoun County, is utilizing tax breaks and a \$1.5 million state grant to expand in Mecklenburg County. The expansion will add 100 more jobs, but they'll all be in Southside, not Spotsylvania.

sPower points to millions of dollars of increased tax revenues the land would generate as a solar plant instead of a tree farm, with no corresponding pressure on county services that a residential subdivision in that same location would create. But a tree farm and a suburban subdivision are not the only options there.

Dr. Dean Bellas of Alexandria-based Urban Analytics, who was hired by Concerned Citizens to analyze the economic impact of the proposed solar farm, noted that “under the sPower proposal, Spotsylvania County will receive declining tax revenues annually on a per-acre basis on an appreciating asset (real estate).”

Bellas concluded that “the forgone tax revenues to Spotsylvania County from alternative development scenarios are substantial... The County would also enjoy larger economic benefits (new jobs, new labor income, and the multiplier effect on the local economy) with less acreage needed.”

Bottom line: If Microsoft or Apple were building a new data center in Spotsylvania County and creating high-paying jobs there, a good case could be made for building such a large solar facility alongside to power it. But that's not the case. All of the electricity produced, and most of the jobs the project will support after a brief construction period, will be elsewhere.

Even under a best-case scenario with no adverse impacts on local residents, Spotsylvania County will forgo the possibility of more lucrative economic development in the area for a 30-year deal that will mostly benefit sPower and two of the largest corporations in the world. Property taxes and a \$25 million good-faith gesture are not enough to offset the potential loss of new jobs, future economic development and the increased tax revenue it would bring, and the loss of thousands of acres of agricultural land.

Solar power can and should be part of Virginia's energy mix, but this project is too big and offers too few benefits to the county. The Board of Supervisors should follow the Planning Commission's recommendation and grant sPower a special use permit only on the smallest of the three parcels.

# I-95 study confirms Smart Scale failures

**L**AST WEEK, Virginia Department of Transportation Deputy Secretary Nick Donohue released the results of the first phase of VDOT's latest study of the 179 miles of Interstate 95 that run through the Commonwealth of Virginia. But the results certainly weren't news to local officials in the Fredericksburg region or area commuters, all of whom are intimately familiar with the commonwealth's failure to keep traffic flowing on the East Coast's most important interstate highway.

For example, the first phase of the new VDOT study found that the worst problem areas in terms of congestion on I-95 between the North Carolina border and Washington, D.C. can be found at the Occoquan River crossing in Prince William County and (you guessed it!) right here in Fredericksburg.

But as we pointed out in February, Round Three of the state's Smart Scale program inexplicably rejected Prince William's application for a \$31.1 million project to address the existing bottleneck at the Occoquan River exit.

Smart Scale also rejected the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's \$34.3 million proposal to widen southbound I-95 from three lanes to four lanes between Exits 130 (State Route 3) and 126 (Massaponax), where traffic will inevitably bottleneck after the Southbound Rappahannock River Crossing project approved in the first round is completed.

A previous study of I-95 commissioned by FAMPO found that the resulting bottleneck there will become a major problem during evening rush hours and on weekends starting in 2023—just one year after the \$125 million river crossing project is scheduled to open.

And by 2045, that section of I-95 will likely be failing, with traffic backing up all the way to the edge of the old chokepoint that the southbound crossing project is being built to relieve.

And another chokepoint on Long Bridge, the only rail bridge over the Potomac River between Virginia and D.C., which greatly restricts the number of commuter trains that could be helping to relieve traffic congestion on I-95, also remains unfunded, Donohue said.

Is this smart? Hardly.

We didn't need another study to know that "bottlenecks frustrate

drivers, slow down traffic, cause accidents and hamper what should be the commonwealth's goal of free-flowing traffic, especially in its primary transportation corridors. These projects should be at the top of Smart Scale's list, not the bottom."

But another study has just confirmed it anyway, for the record.

Donohue told residents attending a meeting to discuss the latest study at Fredericksburg's James Monroe High School that "there are more problems on the I-95 corridor than dollars to fix them."

No doubt.

But there's an even bigger problem when state transportation officials, whose job it is to prioritize projects in order to maximize the impact of the tax dollars that are available, do such a poor job of it that the two areas in the commonwealth with the worst congestion problems on I-95, according to VDOT's own latest study, don't get the money to fix or at least help alleviate them.

This just ensures more of the same for years to come.

Chronic stop-and-go traffic congestion on I-95 not only saps commuters' time, it also results in unnecessary emissions due to excessive fuel use, lost productivity for businesses, constraints on economic development, and a general degradation of the quality of life in an area whose strategic location between Washington and Richmond, skilled workforce and natural beauty should make it a mecca for business.

If Smart Scale can't prioritize known existing bottlenecks on the most heavily traveled interstate highway in the nation, Smart Scale itself needs an overhaul.

It's time for members of the General Assembly to step in and make sure that happens.

No more excuses—and no more spending taxpayer money on studies telling us what we already know.



FILE / PETER CIHELKA / FREE LANCE-STAR

# No easy answers to gun violence

**I**N JUNE, when Gov. Ralph Northam called a special session on gun control after the mass shooting by a municipal employee in Virginia Beach, he pointedly challenged the Republican-led General Assembly to come up with “votes and laws, not thoughts and prayers” to end gun violence in the commonwealth.

The legislature adjourned after 90 minutes, tasking the bipartisan Virginia Crime Commission to look at dozens of gun control proposals and come up with recommendations by mid-November. The move was widely viewed as a cynical way to avoid dealing with a politically charged issue before the Nov. 5 election.

Last Tuesday, the commission released a three-page report on the Virginia Beach massacre that tossed the hot-potato back to the General Assembly. After noting that “overall findings from the research were often insufficient, mixed, contradictory, or based on limited methodology,” the report concluded that “staff determined that inconclusive evidence exists to develop recommendations.”

The commission’s approach could be characterized as another cop-out—except for the fact that nobody, including the governor, knows how to prevent a mass shooting from happening again, which is supposedly the main goal of Northam’s gun control agenda, which he says will be his number one issue next session.

After an exhaustive investigation into the background of 40-year-old public utilities engineer DeWayne Craddock, Virginia Beach Deputy Police Chief Patrick Gallagher told city officials in September that the police still had no clue why he went on his murderous rampage.

A months-long independent investigation into the mass shooting likewise yielded no easy answers. A 262-page report presented to the Virginia Beach City Council by Chicago-based security firm Hillard Heintze also concluded that there were no red flags that could have prevented the May 31 massacre.

Besides a lack of warning signs, independent investigators uncovered no plausible reason why Craddock, described as a divorced “loner” with few close relationships, decided to mow down 12 people, 11 of them his co-workers, with two legally purchased handguns. Although he had recently been written up by one of his victims for having a “poor attitude,” they could still not explain how such seemingly ordinary “stressors” turned him into a mass murderer.

“The information is just not there,” Arnette Heintze, the company’s CEO and founder, told reporters.

Despite the city’s inability to prevent the massacre, the Hillard Heintze report offered 60 recommendations, including installing more security cameras and beefing up its emergency notification system, since the first “active shooter” notification was sent after all the victims were already dead. All good ideas, but after the fact.

Likewise, an exhaustive report by a blue-ribbon panel following the 2007 massacre of 32 students and staff at Virginia Tech detailed major failings in the commonwealth’s mental health and law enforcement systems that enabled Seung Hui Cho, who had exhibited severe mental health issues since childhood, to legally purchase the two handguns he used during his bloody rampage.

However, the Northam administration’s review of the Virginia Tech panel’s 91 recommendations found that the vast majority of them had already been implemented before the Virginia Beach incident.

What’s left? Universal background checks? Ten-day waiting periods? Limits on the number of guns that can be purchased each month? Red flag laws? A ban on “assault” weapons? Regulating the purchase of ammunition? Raising the legal age to purchase a firearm?

California already passed all those gun control laws and then some, including a prohibition on openly carrying an *unloaded* handgun in public, in addition to the usual bans for felons, sex offenders, and the mentally incompetent.

Yet none of those “votes and laws” were able to prevent one disturbed 16-year-old from opening fire in his Santa Clarita high school and killing two of his fellow students, or another shooter from killing four people and wounding six others at a football watch party in Fresno—both within the last two weeks.

Whether it’s a toxic mix of mental illness, social maladjustment, cultural rot, disrespect for human life or just plain evil that precipitates these premeditated mass murders, one thing is clear: Nobody really knows why they keep happening or how to stop them.

“Votes and laws” that restrict the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding gun owners in Virginia will allow Gov. Northam and his allies in Richmond to virtue signal, but they won’t solve the underlying problem of gun violence or mass murder in a society that’s unraveling before our eyes.