

# Solar farm operation planned in Piney River at former titanium mine site

Justin Faulconer

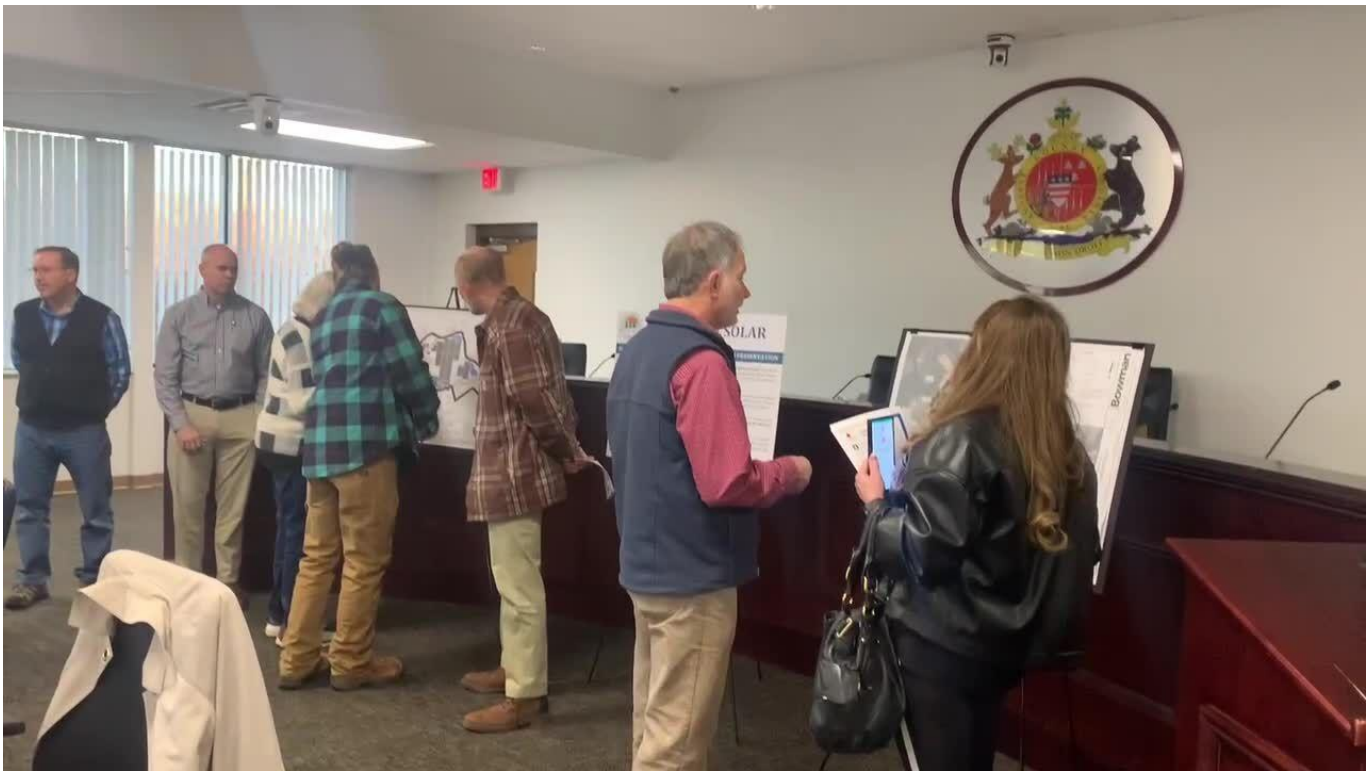
Feb 1, 2023



A view of the Piney River solar project, proposed for private land situated between Patrick Henry Highway and Rose Mill Road in Amherst County, on display during a Jan. 24 open house-style meeting in Amherst.

Photo by Justin Faulconer, the New Era-Progress

Justin Faulconer



A former titanium mine site in Piney River is targeted to become Amherst County's third solar generation facility.

Piney River Solar LLC plans to seek zoning approval from the county to operate a 50-megawatt solar panel farm on private land situated between Patrick Henry Highway and Rose Mill Road. The former titanium mine property with a history of heavy industrial pollution is ideal for repurposing to a site for domestically produced renewable energy, according to a description of the project made available to the public during an open house meeting in Amherst on Jan. 24.

The project close to the Nelson County border on Virginia 151 is expected to provide enough power to serve about 13,500 homes and will generate more than \$8 million in tax revenue for Amherst County over a 40-year projected lifespan, a handout from the solar company states. "It will also provide 200 well-paying construction jobs over the 6-9 months of construction while providing a boost to local hospitality businesses," the handout reads.

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Piney River Solar LLC is part of Energix, a company with locations in Arlington and Roanoke.

Dominika Sink, director of development for Energix, said the company has nine solar projects operational in Virginia and six are under construction with the largest at 118 megawatts. She said solar energy is a good way to revitalize a former industrial property with limited options for reuse.

“It’s a really well-sited project,” Sink said in an interview during the open house. “It’s got a lot of natural vegetation to cover it. It’s got a lot of topography around it to hide it really well.”

Sink said the project ties into Virginia’s clean economy plan that aims for the most responsible and affordable ways to generate power.

“It doesn’t pollute; it is the cheapest energy source,” Sink said. “The technology we use is American-made.”

The project will only use American-made solar panels that guarantee a quality product with an active recycling plan, according to Piney River Solar LLC.

“We’re working closely with [Virginia’s Department of Environmental Quality] to make sure that is done in the right way and is safe and responsible,” Sink said of reusing the property.

The location also is beneficial for feeding into existing electrical providers, she said.

“It’s in a fairly remote location where there are few residences, few neighbors, and they are far away from the project,” Sink said. “After construction there’s very little the project requires. The good thing about it is we don’t generate traffic or any burden on the county infrastructure because it’s temporary.”

While adhering to strict oversight of federal and state environmental agencies, the Piney River site will be transformed into an environmentally clean property that encourages biodiversity and will have vegetative buffering to fully screen the panels from roads, houses and other amenities, according to the company.

“Piney River Solar LLC is committed to being a long-term partner of Amherst County and is excited to contribute in a meaningful way to the community,” the company said in its project description.

Tyler Creasy, Amherst County’s acting co-director of community development, said the Piney River solar farm project is the largest proposed in the county to date. Two others, which received county officials’ zoning approval in 2021 and last year, were each at five megawatts.

The company is expected to file an application in the coming months that will require public hearings through the Amherst County Planning Commission and the Amherst County Board of Supervisors, he said.

Creasy said a solar farm is a viable reuse of the property since it doesn’t require groundwater, which would be an issue for other forms of potential development uses.

“From what I’ve gathered, it’s all about two things: the topography of the land and interconnecting into the existing electrical grid,” Creasy said of selecting sites for solar operations. “You’ve got to have a way to send that power somewhere else. It’s all about finding those layouts, is what I’ve been told.”

**By Justin Faulconer**



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## **New multi-tenant building in Amelon Commerce Center moving closer to bid stages for construction**

**Justin Faulconer**

Mar 15, 2023



The entrance to Amelon Commerce Center.

Photo courtesy of Victoria Hanson, Economic Authority of Amherst County

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Justin Faulconer





Construction is planned to begin this year on a 45,000-square-foot multi-tenant building for technology-based industries within the Amelon Commerce Center in Madison Heights.

Andrew Proctor, chair of the board of directors of the Amherst County Economic Development Authority, reported on the project and other initiatives the EDA is working on during the county board of supervisors' March 7 meeting.

The EDA was awarded a \$3 million grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration to build the new multi-tenant building, a project expected to create 45 jobs, retain two dozen jobs and generate \$3.25 million in private investment, Proctor reported.

“This has been a dream of the EDA for many years, actually,” Proctor said of the facility.

He said there could be as many as four sections in the building and the EDA is getting closer to sending out for construction bids. Design and engineering have been completed and the EDA's first \$1.25 million economic development bond to finance the new building has been closed on, according to the report.

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“We’re crossing our fingers because we know construction costs have gone up again but we will do the best we can and handle that challenge when it comes, if it comes,” Proctor said.

Proctor thanked supervisors for their investments in the EDA’s ongoing efforts.

“It’s really cool to see what is going on in Amherst County,” Proctor said. “We really focus on existing businesses and bringing in new businesses. That’s really at the core of our goal. We want to grow those, we want to help develop, because those will bring in new high paying-jobs and we want to create a stable and diverse tax base.”

Grading is underway on the Amelon center’s Lot 4, the largest lot in the industrial park with capacity for a 200,000-square-foot building, the report shows. The EDA received a \$225,000 state GO Virginia grant with a match from the authority for that endeavor.

“The good news is we’re starting to fill up the commerce center,” Proctor said. “The challenge is: Where do we go after that? We’re working on that... We definitely want to stay ahead of the game because hopefully we can build these up and have the challenge of needing a new spot for more businesses.”

The EDA also assisted four companies with expansion and new project developments in the center.



Frank Good Builders has purchased a lot in the center to build a 10,200-square-foot headquarters and warehouse ranging from \$1.5 million to \$2 million.

“They see the county as an area of growth for them and their business, which I think is also good for our economic development in the county, in addition to them moving into this lot,” Proctor said.

Summers & Sons Inc./T.R.U. Ball, a company that produces machinery and archery products close to the Virginia 130 and U.S. 29 intersection, also has announced expansion plans to purchase a lot in the center and construct a 24,518-square-foot corporate headquarters and assembly building, Proctor said.

Integrated Technologies Group also has purchased a building in the park it has leased from the EDA in recent years, he said.

The EDA was awarded a \$322,071 Virginia Business Readiness Sites Program grant for the Dillard site, a tract of more than 500 acres located in close proximity to Dillard Road and Virginia 130 in Madison Heights. The authority has funded a match of \$161,029 toward the goal of getting it in a position to be operational in 18 months.

The two Dillard tract lots could land manufacturing projects with buildings of 1.2 million square feet and 420,000 square feet, according to the presentation.

Proctor said the Dillard property is about getting larger tracts of developed land available at the state level in attracting industry and business opportunities.

“We want to be on the short part of that list. We want them to see Amherst County first,” Proctor said. “This could be roughly 2,000 jobs between the two lots.”

The Lynchburg region has lost on major opportunities to other states because of a lack of available properties, Proctor said.

“We want to start winning these,” Proctor said of such opportunities. “That’s why we’re focused on this particular site.”

The EDA also has continued to work with education and workforce development partners to expand the “talent pipeline” of prospective employees, including a career and technical education (CTE) coach to assist Amherst County Public Schools students in understanding CTE career fields.

“We’re trying to keep that talent here,” Proctor said.

Proctor also emphasized the EDA’s involvement in regional efforts to redevelop the Central Virginia Training Center property in Madison Heights, noting its importance to the county and Lynchburg area.

“We certainly appreciate the work you do for the county,” Tom Martin, the board of supervisors’ chair, said to the EDA.

**By Justin Faulconer**

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## 'She leads by example': Amherst McDonald's manager honored with award

Justin Faulconer

Sep 6, 2023



Wesla Secrist, center (in white), general manager of McDonald's in Amherst, smiles during a group photo with employees. Photo by Justin Faulconer, the New Era-Progress

Justin Faulconer



During lunch rush at McDonald's in the town of Amherst on Aug. 31, cheers rang out among the staff as Wesla Secrist, the restaurant's general manager, was presented the Ray Kroc Award, an accolade that recognizes the chain's top-performing restaurant managers globally.

Secrist is among 394 McDonald's restaurant managers from 70 markets who represent the top 1% of managers to receive the honor, which includes a cash prize, a trophy and a trip to attend the McDonald's Worldwide Convention in Barcelona, Spain, in April.

McDonald's independent franchisees and regional management nominate restaurant managers for the Ray Kroc Award to recognize those who have led their team to outstanding business performance, reflect the culture and values of the McDonald's system, according to a news release from the food service retailer with more than 40,000 restaurants in 120 countries.

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More than 90% of McDonald's restaurants worldwide are owned and operated by independent local entrepreneurs, the release said.

Buddy Haithcock, a franchise business partner with McDonald's, presented the award to Secrist at the Amherst restaurant Aug. 31.

"We really appreciate all you've done," Haithcock told Secrist. "The way you treat your customers, the values that you put forth way day in and out ... The results are phenomenal."

Secrist gathered with employees for a group photo in front of the restaurant's front counter, her face lighting up with a smile as bright as the menu board above.

"My people, it's them," she said of why she got the award.

She said the honor means a lot to her.

"I feel like I got it because of my team," Secrist said. "I've got a really good team. They work really well together. They've got great attitudes."

Mike Freeman, the local owner and operator of the Amherst McDonald's, said Secrist is a "blessing" and major part of the location's success. He said he could not ask for a better general manager and many customers, neighbors and people who know him constantly praise her leadership and the store's performance.

"Wesla has run this restaurant so well in so many ways, so consistent," Freeman said.

Chad Secrist, her husband, also briefly spoke during the event of her hard work and dedication to the job.

“Leaders like her, you live it,” he said. “On her days off she is still filling out the daily reports.”

Chloe Ellis, a McDonald’s employee at the Amherst location, said Wesla’s leadership is a big reason she works there. Wesla is considerate of all her employees and makes it a comfortable, enjoyable place to work, Ellis said.

“Wesla does a great job here ... From the time I started she’s doing nothing but help me grow,” Ellis said. “She’s a great individual all around.”

Freeman said Wesla “walks the walk” as a manager of the restaurant of roughly 50 employees and is in the 97th to 98th percentile of McDonald’s in areas such as speedy service and friendliness.

“She leads by example,” Freeman said. “She’s very consistent with her people and because of that, they respond to her and they follow her and her leadership comes through in that year ... She supports her people one-on-one and they respond and they work so hard for her. And this team is as good as it gets at McDonald’s.”

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**By Justin Faulconer**

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