

Solar farm means more tax revenue

Chapel Hill firm will sell to Duke Energy

By JIM WISE
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DURHAM A Chapel Hill solar-energy company got a stamp of approval last week for building a high-power "solar farm" in rural Durham county.

Strata Solar won the Board of Adjustment's unanimous OK for a megawatt sun-power plant on Bacon Road, west of Rougemont near the Orange County line.

"It (will produce) a lot of electricity," said Lance Williams, Strata Solar's development manager. "It produces enough ... to (power) 700 houses on average. Which means on a summer day, it's probably producing enough electricity for more like 1,500 houses." "Solar farm" is an array of photovoltaic cells that collects sunlight and

converts it to electricity that may be dedicated to a particular building or development, or sold to the local electrical utility. The 43-acre Bacon Road farm's power will be sold to Duke Energy Progress, said Strata Vice President Blair Schooff.

Strata Solar, which the trade journal Solar Power World (bit.ly/1bCIROS) ranked as the nation's sixth-largest solar contractor, already has plants in Orange, Person, Chatham and Wake counties in the Triangle area. According to city-county planners, Bacon Road is the largest commercial solar-power project so far proposed in Durham County.

"I'm excited to see that happen; I think it's terrific," said Tobin Fried, Durham city-county sustainability manager.

"This is a good use for this piece of property," Williams told the Board of Adjustment when making the company's case for a special-use per-

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DURHAM CITY-COUNTY SUSTAINABILITY MANAGER

mit that is required because the solar farm is going into a rural residential area.

Strata is leasing the land, providing income for the W.R. Harris family and raising the property's tax value to Durham County, he said.

"We're taking part of the property out of agricultural use, which is not generating much tax revenue, and putting in excess of \$10 million worth of solar panels down on it. And we will provide a tax base that averages (providing) the county around \$30,000 a year," Williams said.

According to Durham County tax records, the property currently pro-

duces about \$1,200 a year in property tax. And, Williams said, the solar farm won't need any county services: "It won't be putting anyone into the schools."

There was no opposition to Strata's permit. But because the solar farm is to be enclosed with a 10-foot fence and locked gate, neighboring landowner Doug Toth said some of his chickens, guinea fowl, turkeys or ducks could easily fly over the fence and wanted to know how he could get them back.

"We'll give you a phone number," said Strata engineer Brent Niemann.

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