

# Solar farm generates sparks

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## Neighbors say proposed operation does not fit community

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**HILLSBOROUGH** The Orange County Board of Commissioners could decide this fall whether an Arizona company can build a 4-megawatt solar farm on half a

50-acre property north of Chapel Hill.

Sunlight Partners wants to build an unmanned solar farm beside the Falls of New Hope neighborhood off Mt. Sinai Road at 5609 Cascade Drive. An 8-foot chainlink fence inside a 50-foot-wide landscape buffer would shield some neighbors from the proposed field of six- to 10-foot-tall, fixed photovoltaic solar panels.

The site is in the county's Rural

Buffer, which allows some solar projects. If approved, the solar farm could be built over three months and maintained twice a month. The company plans to hire a local landscaper to care for the land.

The N.C. Utilities Commission approved the company's plan in July 2013. The process included an N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission review that recommended keeping 50- to 100-foot buffers around two existing streams and

re-seeding with short grasses to limit mowing.

Most of the roughly 100 people at last week's public hearing opposed the project. Speakers said they support solar energy but don't think a solar farm fits an established neighborhood for reasons including noise, traffic, and the potential chemical leaks, increased stormwater runoff and reflected sunlight causing a glare.

SEE **SOLAR**, PAGE 3A

Solar researchers report traffic is minimal once a farm is built, and the sound generated usually can't be heard 50 to 100 feet away, according to a 2012 UNC School of Government report. The inverter, which converts the power before it enters the electrical grid, sounds like an air conditioner, and vegetation under the solar panels continues to absorb runoff, the report says. The glare risk is typically in early morning or late evening, it says.

Residents also worry about the effect on property values and losing the existing view. Appraisers testified for both positive and negative effects on property values, but industry experts say the state doesn't have enough experience to offer a clear answer.

"This facility, with its 18,000 panels over 20 acres, will permanently transform what is one of the most bucolic and tranquil residential neighborhoods in the county into what amounts to an industrial zone," neighbor Bob Cantwell said.

Last week's hearing will continue Sept. 8. The delay also postpones the county Planning Board's scheduled reviews.

The company would lease the land for 15 years from property owners Sheila and Mike Bishop and Virginia Nunn, who also owns her home across Mt. Sinai Road. The company could renew the lease at least two times for five years each, the family said.

Sunlight Partners would sell the electricity to Duke Energy.

The family lives to the south — not far from the proposed solar farm — on land that once belonged to Sheila Bishop's father and uncle. Sons Chris and Carson are the fifth generation in Orange County, she said, and her grandfather, William Nunn, sold the land for Falls of New Hope in 1966.

Mike Bishop said they investigated potential concerns and sought a second opinion from Strata Solar in Chatham County before negotiating with Sunlight Partners to double the buffer, plant taller trees and ensure dead plants would be replaced.

Farmer Bob Strayhorn most recently harvested hay from the field but isn't able any longer. That could end an existing agricultural property tax exemption, the family said, and a solar farm seemed to be a responsible use of the land.

The deal also could preserve their inheritance and help Nunn, who is approaching 88 with serious health concerns, pay her property taxes and hire a caretaker so she can stay in her home, Chris Bishop said.

"Do (neighbors) really think that we should let them continue to enjoy the view, and us get nothing out of it?" Sheila Bishop asked.

Relations with their neighbors have been difficult for a long time, and they've had trespassers who think their property belongs to the subdivision, Mike Bishop said. His "no trespassing" signs are often torn down, he said.

Sunlight Partners, founded in 2010, has 48 potential North Carolina sites under consideration, company officials said. The state's solar industry is booming due largely to tax credits and state laws that reduce solar costs by more than half, and a requirement that power companies provide up to 12.5 percent of energy sales through renewable sources by 2021.

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