

When green energy means less green landscape

Solar array: Renewable energy leap or 'industrialization of our mountaintops?'

By Adam Shanks

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NORTH ADAMS — When John Savage looks out from his Yale Street home, a new clearing on the hillside across the valley below grabs his eye.

Acres of forest above Witt's Ledge, commonly known as Coca-Cola Ledge, has been cut for the installation of a new photovoltaic solar array.

The project is an "industrialization of our mountaintops," Savage said this week during a joint hearing of the Planning Board and City Council.

"I'm a supporter of solar energy; there's many places it can be put," he said, "but putting solar energy and industrial sites on our mountaintops — a vital resource to this town — I think is the wrong way to go."

The 1.32-megawatt array, approved by the Planning Board last year, is being built by Colorado-based solar developer Clean Energy Collective on 6.1 acres of a 29 acre property near Reservoir Road owned by Ross Ziskind. Construction on the project has prompted anger from residents and motivated city officials to move quickly on formulating new solar zoning restrictions, which had already been in works as the city attempts to be designated as a green community.

Planning Board Chairman Michael Leary said drawings from different perspectives throughout the city, which were presented during Clean Energy's application process, did not show how visible the clearing would be.

"It was not evident, as it is unfortunately now," he said, adding that the renderings provided by the developer do not match what has been built.

"The Planning Board very strongly said to the developer that we did not want it to be visible, we did not want it to be evident," Leary said "We cherish the mountains as much as anybody."

The development also drew questions and criticism from the City Council. "You've got beautiful, beautiful mountain views and you put something like that up there and I just find it very unattractive," said City Councilor Robert Moulton, Jr.

Without zoning ordinances in place, it remains unclear what authority the Planning Board has over the project. Leary said the developer has been called back before the Planning Board at its Nov. 14 meeting to explain the situation.

Although any new restrictions passed by the city won't apply to the already-underway development near Reservoir Road, they will continue to be discussed by the City Council and Planning Board at meetings next month and could impact the city's approach to solar for years to come.



This solar array is under construction in North Adams just above Reservoir Road and Witt's Ledge, a.k.a. Coca Cola Ledge. The view is from the Western Summit on Route 2 in North Adams. (Photos by Gillian Jones — The Berkshire Eagle | photos.berkshireeagle.com)

As currently written, the proposal would restrict the height of ground mounted solar arrays to the existing height limitations for accessory and principal buildings — up to 12 feet and up to 30 feet, respectively.

Members of the Planning Board already have expressed concern about the potential for a 30-foot-tall solar panel, so that could be changed.

The proposal would allow solar development by right in Industrial-1 zones, which are the main industrial areas of the city, and several other zones by special permit.

The main point of concern is whether or not development will be allowed in Rural 1 zones, which account for much of the city's hillsides, including where the array near Reservoir Road is being built.

"There should be a great deal of restriction on what we do because once a mountain is changed, it is changed forever. It will never be repaired," Savage said. "This is an economic question; these mountains are why people come here."

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