

## Solar farm casts shadow



Matt Hinshaw/The Daily Courier  
Neighbors Claudette and Bob Johnson and Joyce and Mike Calhoun sit and talk Tuesday afternoon in the Calhouns' backyard overlooking some of the property that will be used for the APS solar farm in Chino Valley.

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Pleas from a group of Chino Valley homeowners failed to dissuade the Chino Valley Town Council from giving its unanimous support to a sprawling solar farm.

The meeting marked the end of a contentious debate between the state's largest utility and a group of town residents who have concerns about the farm.

"Personally, I would rather see a quiet project like this," Vice-Mayor Ron Romley said. "I can't see that this project is detrimental."

Councilman Joel Baker agreed with Romley.

"I am convinced that it is good for the town," he said. "For the good of all and the welfare of all, I support it."

Arizona Public Service now has the green light to buy 298 acres of the James Deep Well Ranch property for an \$88 million solar farm project. SunEdison will build the farm, with nearly 81,000 photovoltaic panels, and then hand the keys over to the utility to run over the next 30 years.

The panels will sit on 160 acres and generate 20 megawatts of power when it comes online.

The utility is forecasting an eight-month construction window generating 120 jobs at its peak, with about 75 percent of that workforce from the tri-city area.

The plans includes a 41,000-square-foot substation, water tank and tower, communications building, fencing topped with barbed wire around the farm, and trees between the fence and the roughly 70 properties that will eventually watch their serene backyard views turn partially to black.

A few days before the meeting, resident Phyllis Roth said she believed council members had already made their decision.

"We're saying they're just trying to push this down our throats," she said. "They're behaving like this is a done deal and we have no choice."

Roth told council members Tuesday night that she fears the farm will prevent her from selling her home, and referenced a letter she sent them from a prospective buyer who got cold feet after hearing about the solar project.

The letter's author, George Shamblin, who lives about 20 minutes outside of Port Angeles, Wash., said in a Friday phone call that he isn't interested in living in a home with a solar farm out back.

"We feel that a field of solar panels in that area would destroy the wonderful view in back," he wrote. "If the APS does this, we would not be interested in continuing with any offers on your property."

Neighboring residents fear the solar farm will have a negative impact on their property values.

Realtor Travis Bard is listing a property in the center of the farm debate, and he also lives in the community.

While Bard admits he doesn't have any firm data to back up his belief that the solar farm will hurt property values, he thinks it will at least stall sales as prospective buyers wait to see what happens.

"When you put something that massive next to residential, there is bound to be an impact," he said. "That's the hard thing, though - it's unknown. People know what a subdivision next door is going to do; they know what a commercial complex next door is going to do, because its been done before."

Prescott Attorney Clint Brown spoke to the council about a letter dated May 3 that suggests a solar farm next to residential property could mean a hit to property values.

The letter has Assessor Pam Pearsall and Chief Deputy Ronald D. Gibbs' names on the top left and the assessor's letterhead at the top. But Pearsall sent a letter to Lawyer Alex Vakula on May 9, stating that the letter did not have her approval or authorization and it is not her position or the position of her office.

Mayor Jim Bunker shot down the letter because it doesn't have a signature and he was unable to verify its author.

Meanwhile, Romley said earlier this week that he understands that some residents don't want the farm in their backyard. But Romley said the property owner could just as easily decide to rezone the land and put hundreds of homes on it.

"If I lived there, I would prefer the sea of black rather than all the homes that it's going

to take," Romley said. "I think it's in a good location and, yeah, it's a good trade-off."

While the benefits for the property owner, SunEdison and the utility are self-evident, the town's long-term gains are undecided. The sun goes down on most of the jobs once construction ends.

APS claims the town's incremental tax benefit is \$3.1 million. But the town doesn't have property taxes and that \$3.1 million doesn't go directly to town coffers; rather, it goes to taxing jurisdictions, according to Bunker, who added that the town hasn't forecast the sales tax bump the farm might create.

The farm will produce enough energy to power 4,750 homes, but that electricity isn't necessarily staying in town.

Utility Spokesman Steven Gotfried said the power goes on the grid for all APS customers to use.

Mike Calhoun came to town 34 years ago and his backyard view will change forever. Calhoun said earlier this week that he wanted APS to push the farm back behind the power poles that are roughly a half-mile from his fence, or see if a land swap with the state might work to push the farm south and further away.

"We've got our life investments here and it looks like it could change," he said.

With regard to the idea of pushing the farm south and doing a land swap with the state, Romley said getting state land is "almost impossible," and the state's asking price is usually higher than everybody else's is.

Romley said he doesn't have an answer on the property value concern.

"I don't know if it's going to depress property values or the property values are depressed already," he said. "You put 170 homes out there, I don't think it's going to increase it any."

Another resident, Claudette Johnson, supports the solar farm in concept, but she argued a few days ago that it's an industrial business going in a residential community.

"They're trying to ram this down our throats," she said.

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