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Solar highway gets mixed reviews

WL is one of several sites being considered for

BY KARA HANSEN

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A proposal to build the world's biggest solar highway project in West Linn drew mixed reviews at one of two town hall meetings designed to gather feedback on the idea.

About 30 people gathered at city hall June 11, the first of the meetings. Another was held Tuesday. The city also hosted a forum on its Web site to take additional questions and comments from local stakeholders.

The results?

While many residents approve of powering the transportation system with renewable energy, they also worry about the impact on their properties.

"My concern is having the 'show and tell' go through my backyard," said Frances Hanna, who lives on Riverknoll Way, just north of the project site. "If there is some way we can have the solar and not have the invasion of people coming in close proximity to our property, then I would be all for it."

Meanwhile, Oregon City residents have raised concerns about their view from across the Willamette

West Linn is one of several places on the table as the Oregon Department of Transportation looks to energy needed along state highways with renewable sources.

Another option is to expand an existing solar panel installation at the Interstate 5 and I-205 interchange Tualatin. Officials are also considering a project at the Baldock rest area off I-5 south of Wilsonville.

But West Linn's project is the biggest.

Rows of solar panels would stretch about 2,000 feet long across a benched hillside on state-owned land an old, unused rest area off Interstate 205.

Now home to heavy-duty equipment, gravel piles, wood debris and work sheds, the site is north of the freeway and north of the 10th street exit.

A city trail starting on Salamo Road would cut behind homes on Riverknoll and Barrington Drive to view over the hillside.

Officials say panels placed there could generate as much as 3 megawatts, or 3.2 million kilowatt hours of electricity each year.

That's about one-sixth of what ODOT uses in the area. Today, the world's largest solar highway, in Germany, produces 2.8 megawatts.

Lynn Frank of Salem-based Five Stars International, a company hired to help with the Oregon solar initiative, facilitated the meeting at city hall.



SUBMITTED PHOTO
This existing solar panel exists at the Interstate 5 and I-205 interchange just west of West Linn. A large area of land along I-205 in West Linn is being considered by the state to generate energy needed along the highway.

long-distance transmission.

By partnering with a company like Portland General Electric, ODOT's \$20 million project could take advantage of tax credits, upgrading technology and reducing the agency's burden on the electrical grid added cost to PGE ratepayers, he said.

In addition, Oregon companies would supply the technology, raw materials and workers to install and maintain the solar panels.

"There's an investment there that goes beyond the energy it will produce," Frank said.

Joshua Proudfoot of the Eugene-based Good Company said the rows of solar panels will be "pretty invisible" from the neighborhood to the north. Two or three-dozen houses sit on top of the hill.

"The largest number of folks that would see it are from Oregon City," Proudfoot said. "They'll look straight at it."

However, he cautioned Oregon City residents that artistic renderings created so early in the process do a disjustice to the plan.

"In reality, when you get on the bluff, what you're going to see is a much thinner line, and we can plant shrubs that won't compromise the arrays but will disrupt that line," Proudfoot said.

Visibility remains a concern for homeowners such as Karen Montoya, chairwoman of Oregon City's South End Neighborhood Association.

In addition to herself, about 16 neighbors could lose what are now "million-dollar views," she said.

William Gifford, chairman of Oregon City's McLoughlin Neighborhood Association, agreed.

"I think this impacts Oregon City more than West Linn," he said. "It's good all the way around, aside from the issues of the appearance of it."

However, Glen Friedman, chairman of West Linn's Sustainability Advisory Board, doesn't believe an unobstructed view would be destroyed.

"If they don't notice the construction equipment there now, they're not going to notice this later," he said.

Tamara Gilbert, a sustainability advisory group member who lives in Barrington Heights, said she's optimistic the project will overcome such challenges.

"People seem to be on board with it, but they're concerned about issues that directly affect their backyards," she said. "People can come together and state their priorities. There seems to be a lot of flexibility with the project right now, and it's a tremendous opportunity."

City Councilor Jody Carson felt the project "fits in well with our goals for the city in really focusing on sustainable and environmentally friendly."

"We want to see West Linn become a very good suburb, and this would be a good step in that direction," Carson said.

But she stressed the solar highway in West Linn isn't a done deal.

It also remains unclear whether West Linn would receive any monetary benefit such as the franchise fee paid for utilities located in the public right of way.

The state transportation commission will consider moving forward with various solar highway projects at a meeting Tuesday, said Frank, of Five Stars International.

If commissioners authorize ODOT to formally explore a specific project, there would be additional meetings and new designs drawn up.

The soonest West Linn would see a completed solar installation above I-205 would be the latter part Frank said.

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