

# WestLinn Tidings

## All clear for solar highway

*The state finds no 'significant impacts' to its plan for a utility-scale solar installation*

BY KARA HANSEN

*The West Linn Tidings, Mar 18, 2010*

**The Oregon Department of Transportation is ready to move ahead with a utility-scale solar energy project after finding no major drawbacks at the planned site, a terraced hillside overlooking Interstate 205 in West Linn.**

The state-commissioned feasibility studies, released Friday, concluded the solar highway would not generate any “significant impacts” on the environment, property values or other resources. Billed as the world’s largest project of its kind, the roadside solar installation could generate up to 3 megawatts of electricity during the day, allowing ODOT to draw out the same amount to power freeway lights at night.

Standing on the grassy hill amid sparse stands of fir trees overlooking the Willamette River, a water treatment pond and the Willamette Marketplace shopping center, Jim Whitty of ODOT called the 47-acre property “a classic solar site.”

The slope, which sits in the state-owned right-of-way north of Interstate 205 and west of Salamo Road, has a sunny southern exposure and offers broad, flat benches to accommodate ground-mounted rows of solar panels. The existing terraces, carved into the hillside during construction of I-205 in 1969, are a bonus.

Residents who live above the proposed facility in West Linn’s Barrington Heights neighborhood “won’t see it straight over it,” said Whitty, manager of the transportation department’s Office of Innovative Partnerships and Alternative Funding. They could maintain a treed buffer along the top bench on the hill. The panels the would only take up about 13 acres, less than a quarter of the total area.

Oregon City residents who live on Canemah Bluff, on the other hand, would look right at the solar highway.

The feasibility report addresses that issue, acknowledging up to 50 homeowners across the river might object to the dark, black-blue solar panels because of their color contrast, which would highlight the already prominent lines of the hillside’s benches. At the same time, “the visual scale of the project area is small relative to the panoramic landscape view” from the bluff, a landscape architect and natural resources planner concluded. Strategic landscaping could help soften the impact, minimizing the effect on the natural scenery.

### Project likely won’t break ground until next year

Now, state officials just need to finalize a deal with Portland General Electric — the public-private partnership allows the entities to take advantage of state and federal tax credits — and secure funding to start construction. With proposed changes limiting the amount of Oregon Business Energy Tax Credits group can tap, the West Linn project likely won’t break ground until next year, officials said.

A separate and smaller solar highway initiative at the Baldock rest area off Interstate 5 is farther ahead in the approval process, and ODOT will likely finish that project before moving ahead in West Linn, Whitty explained.

The new feasibility analysis cost about \$220,000, according to project director Lynn Averbeck. It included assessments of biological resources and threatened or endangered species, wetlands and water quality.



VERN UYETAKE / WEST LINN  
Dry grasses and some wetland-friendly plant cattails dominate the lowest bench of this terraced hillside behind Barrington Heights homes, where a utility-scale solar-energy project is planned. The homes are visible from the proposed project area, but the terracing would prevent West Linn residents from seeing the solar panels, project managers said.

applicable land-use regulations and geotechnical issues, among other topics.

The state also funded research at the request of local stakeholders. Those investigations examined public health effects for people who live near the solar highway site and the potential for glare from photovoltaic panels. At an upcoming open house, separate tables will offer information on each of the predominant

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