

Solar groups commission impact study

On the eve of a planned vote by the Riverside County Board of Supervisors on a proposed \$640 per-acre solar fee, opponents say county officials need to provide more facts and figures.

Three solar industry trade groups announced Monday they have commissioned longtime Inland Empire economist John Husing to perform an in-depth study on the impacts of large-scale solar projects across Southern California's solar belt that includes Riverside County.

"The study that needs to be done is one that evaluates the competitiveness of the various counties most conducive to solar development and the costs and the benefits to a county for locating a project," said Rhonda Mills, Southern California program director for the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies — one of the three groups funding the study.

The other two are the Large-scale Solar Association and the Independent Energy Producers Association, all located in Sacramento.

The industry's action comes after months of negotiation over the fee. The county proposed in June that solar companies pay a 2percent franchise fee on gross revenues

from their projects, but backed off after industry and community opposition.

The solar companies continue to push for an environmental impact study.

The county on Friday released a study it had commissioned that says the \$640 per-acre fee would have minimal effects on solar companies' profits.

Meanwhile, the solar companies countered with a proposal for a \$140 per-acre fee and they have continued to press for a study.

If the board approves the \$640 per-acre fee, a solar plant such as Solar Trust of America's stalled 7,000-acre Blythe project would pay up to \$4.48 million a year.

"We would invite the county to cooperate in the study so they have a comfort level in that," Mills said. "They have declined and that refusal speaks of an inability or unwillingness to talk about facts."

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Neither Riverside County Supervisor John J. Benoit nor other county officials were available for comment Monday, but have repeatedly maintained that such studies are not needed because the proposed fee is neither a tax nor an impact fee.

“It’s a business deal; it’s an arrangement for use of property. It’s a payment like any other business exchange,” Michelle DeArmond, Benoit’s chief-of-staff, said Friday.

But legal experts challenge that view, saying the county must more clearly define the purpose of the fee and how it will be used.

“These are pretty substantial payments,” said Meriem L. Hubbard, a lawyer with the Pacific Legal Foundation, a Sacramento nonprofit firm that specializes in land-use issues and weighed in with a letter to the board Monday.

“Whether this payment is a fee, a tax, a condition on development, it comes with certain procedures they must follow to make this payment constitutional,” she said.

Husing, who has tracked economic activity and impacts in the Inland Empire for years, said Monday the study should take about three to four weeks to complete. It will cover impacts of solar development in counties from Imperial up to Fresno, as well as in neighboring Nevada and Arizona.

Fresno, for example, has been promoting

its flat land and easy access to transmission for four years, and now has more than 30 projects moving through permitting, said Steve Geil, CEO of that county’s Economic Development Corporation.

The main fee developers pay is a \$15,000 application for a conditional use permit, he said.

Husing said the main challenge on the solar report will be quantifying intangible impacts, such as the effects of thousands of solar panels on the physical landscape and views along the Interstate 10 corridor, where most of solar projects in Riverside County are planned.

“You have people around the state thinking about this,” he said. “There isn’t any third-party neutral source trying to come up with a neutral view.”

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The Report

Economist John Husing will look at five key issues in his report on the impacts of solar development in Southern California.

Operating costs for solar projects.
Anticipated revenues.

Economic benefits counties may receive from solar projects, including construction and long-term jobs and other economic activity.

The cost for counties in terms of increased services and other impacts.

The impact different kinds of county fees may have on solar companies' decisions on where to locate their projects.

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