

Plans for massive solar farm in West Lothian scrape through

Plans to turn 148 acres of open farmland into a massive solar farm will surround a West Lothian village with “an industrial estate” for the lifetimes of all but the youngest.

That was the claim of residents from Canal Court near Threemiletown ahead of a wafer-thin vote for the development to go ahead by the Development Management Committee after a two-hour debate.

Open fields will be covered with more than 80,000 solar panels in five areas of land to the north and east of the Canal Court homes which sits on a junction of two B roads in one of the most rural parts of the county.

Mrs Jenny McDonagh a Canal Court resident, told the committee: “This is an industrial estate just metres from my home. It sets a terrible precedent for rural villages. That they don’t matter- it’s only a few houses”

Mrs McDonagh added: “We are gutted. Our houses were built to take in the views. We chose the countryside, we chose the village, we chose a community where people grow up together and care about what happens to the land around us.”

“This has not been a fair process so far. Consultations were

not widely advertised and were mostly the developer telling us what was going to be happening.”

She claimed the company behind the construction proposals – Ampyr Solar Europ – had shown misleading pictures of sheep grazing among panels the same height as the animals. The panels sit 3m tall.

Mrs McDonagh criticised the council’s on-line planning portal which had been difficult for people to navigate. She told the committee “It’s not okay to push something of this magnitude through planning without taking real time to consider the long-term impact on residents”

Planning officers stressed that: “Mitigation measures have been included within the design process.” adding that biodiversity plans would enhance existing nature networks with hedgerow and other planting.

However, they acknowledged: “The scale of the visual change to the east and north-east of Canal Court would be substantial.”

Mark Wood from Ampyr Solar told the committee that the firm had consulted broadly with the community and had reacted and made changes to plans after that consultation.

The proposed development also includes supporting infrastructure such as transformers, on-site cabling and a substation and control building. The development also includes security fencing, CCTV and on-site access tracks. The operational life will be 35 years with an indicative six-month period required for construction.

The land, owned by Hopetoun Estates, is less than two miles from a solar farm plan agreed earlier this year on land it owns near Newton. This site is also being developed by Ampyr.

Chairing the meeting, Councillor Tony Boyle recommended granting consent, with the added condition that planting of

hedgerows and mature screening began before the installation work starts on the thousands of photovoltaic panels.

The vote was split 3/3 between councillors with the chair's casting vote carrying the day.

Councillors Willie Boyle, Damian Doran-Timson and Tom Conn led objections. All were unhappy with the scale of the development and the loss of agricultural land to a commercial development until 2060.

Councillor Boyle said: " I have real issues with the scale. I have issues with prime agricultural land that will be out of use for 35 years. I'll not be here in 35 years, but I'd like to think we're doing our best to develop in a way that's sustainable and positive and I'm not quite seeing it in this application."

Councillor Doran-Timson backed that sentiment, quoting the Victorian writer John Ruskin: "Therefore, when we build, let us think that we build forever."

He added: "I'm supportive that we look at power sources within renewable energy and that market is no doubt going to be forced to develop over the coming years. But with this particular application, I have concerns about with us setting a precedent of changing prime arable land into other uses. I think we need to keep all the farming area we can.

"We have of heard the impact this would have to residents. The impact on the area is of concern to me."

The uncertainty of the language around the potential impact contributed to a "negative cumulative effect" of the plan, he said.

Councillor Conn said that parts of this plan had started off on the boundaries of people's homes before changes had been made. "That's caused a lot of angst for residents."

There were 77 objections to the plans put forward by the applicant, Trinlaymire Net Zero Solar Limited.

Andy McKinnell, the chair of Ecclesmachan and Threemiletown Community Council said the plans had created the biggest upset in years in the community.

The community council called for mature planting before work started and for strict traffic management on the narrow roads around the site.

Councillor Pauline Stafford acknowledged there would be an impact but added: "If we don't increase the pace of renewables what is the landscape of West Lothian going to look like in 35 years?"

"If we strengthen earlier planting, better screening and make sure that this reverts back to agricultural land in 35 years, hopefully improved by biodiversity, the overriding thing for me is tackling the climate crisis and nature crisis so if those things can be better strengthened, I have to support the paper."

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter