

Modesto Irrigation District OKs solar farm

By Ken Carlson

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A 160-acre solar energy farm for north McHenry Avenue received unanimous approval from Modesto Irrigation District directors Tuesday.

The board members approved an environmental impact report and an interconnection agreement with SunPower Corp. of San Jose. SunPower still needs a land use permit from Stanislaus County before starting construction at McHenry and Patterson Road in the fall.

Some of the 40 people who attended the public hearing supported the project, saying it would generate energy without polluting the air. The MID has to meet a state mandate to get a third of its power from renewable sources by 2020.

John McBride, a Del Rio resident, downplayed concerns the solar panels will blemish the scenery north of Modesto.

"I think we will forget it is there," he said. "This is a good thing, not a bad thing."

Cleaning, ag questions

Other speakers questioned the location for the solar farm, saying that wind-blown dust would require frequent cleaning of the panels.

They asked for guarantees that neighbors can farm near the site, that landscaping will be maintained to hide the solar panels and that the company will remove the equipment after the 25-year lease expires.

Some wanted the district to renegotiate the energy purchase agreement, which will require the MID to buy the output for 17 cents per kilowatt-hour, above the going rate for solar electricity.

"SunPower must be licking their chops," said Larry Byrd, a Waterford cattle rancher and candidate for the District 1 director's seat.

MID directors said county government is responsible for enforcing land use regulations for the solar farm. A SunPower representative said the cost of solar electricity has dropped since the purchase agreement was approved 14 months ago.

"The cost is what it is," board member Tom Van Groningen said. "The fact is solar energy is expensive."

The 25-megawatt project would meet about 2 percent of the MID's annual demand, but would be useful on hot sunny days when customers are using air conditioners.

A public hearing hasn't been scheduled for county planners to consider the solar farm. If the county gives approval for construction to begin, SunPower could start producing electricity at the site in mid-2012.

On Tuesday, the district board also approved a 25 percent reduction in the rebates for smaller solar arrays at homes and businesses.

The incentives will drop from \$2 per watt to \$1.50 per watt effective Monday.