https://buffalonews.com/news/local/niagara-county-towns-plan-tougher-regulations-on-solar-power-as-new-projects-surface/article_39e1d1ca-4494-11eb-81a3-33e92a2469e4.html

Niagara County towns plan tougher regulations on solar power as new projects surface

Thomas J. Prohaska
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The solar power project at Timothy Masters' farm as seen from Swann Road in Lewiston on Oct. 30, 2019. The same company, Borrego Solar Systems, was approved for a similar project on Williams Road in Lewiston and is seeking approval for one on Ridge Road.

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Two of Niagara County's largest towns, Lewiston and Wheatfield, have responded to plans for new solar power projects in their communities with plans for tougher laws regulating them.

The Lewiston Town Board will vote Monday on a revised local law requiring fields of solar panels to be located farther away from roads and homes than before.

The new law comes as a 14-month moratorium on new large-scale solar projects in Lewiston is about to end, Supervisor Steve Broderick said.

The Wheatfield Town Board has scheduled a Jan. 25 public hearing on a six-month solar moratorium.

Three new solar projects are on the drawing board in Wheatfield, according to Walter D. Garrow, chairman of the town Planning Board.

Town Attorney Matthew E. Brooks said a committee will be formed to consider amendments to Wheatfield's current solar law.

These laws don't apply to residents placing solar panels for their own use on a roof or in a backyard.

They are meant to regulate large fields of solar panels, generating commercial levels of electricity, but with a capacity of less than 25 megawatts of power.

Larger than that and a system's approval is in the hands of the state, not local governments.

Lewiston has two operating solar farms, on Swann and Moore roads, and a third is under construction on Williams Road, Broderick said.

The beginning stages of construction on a solar farm on Moore Road in Lewiston on Oct. 30, 2019.

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"We got wind that a couple of other solar farms were going to be in other people's backyards," Broderick said.

The new Lewiston law amends one passed in 2018 by banning battery storage of power in a rural-residential zone. Such batteries would only be allowed in industrial zones, Broderick said.

"It's much more restrictive than the existing law," Amy E. Fisk, Niagara County senior planner, told the county Planning Board Monday.

She said the revised Lewiston law puts the onus on the owner of the property, not the company building the system, for safely decommissioning an inactive solar power system.

It also says any solar array must be at least 700 feet from the nearest road or dwelling. The array must be surrounded by a fence of "natural color" at least 8 feet

tall, with barbed wire not allowed. The entire site must be screened from view with trees or other vegetation.

Wheatfield has one active solar farm, a 6.3-megawatt project by Borrego Solar Systems on 30 acres at 2469 Lockport Road. But applications have been made for three others, Garrow said.

Opponents of a solar farm in Wheatfield posted this sign across the road from the site in the summer of 2018.

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Nextera Energy Resources of Juno Beach, Fla., proposes a 7.4-megawatt project, covering 25 acres with solar panels on property owned by Ann and Norman Maerten at 3636 Mapleton Road, and a 5-megawatt, 21.66-acre project on William Kloc's property, 6714 Wheatfield-Pendleton Townline Road.

The county Planning Board tabled both Monday because it considered the site plans and applications incomplete.

Garrow said the third project, which is still before the town planners, is called the Wheatfield Solar Farm, to be built on property owned by George Wasik at 3655 Lockport Road. It would generate up to 5 megawatts of power.

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Reporter

I have covered Niagara County for The Buffalo News since 1995, when I joined the paper after 10 years as news director at WLVL in Lockport.