

MONROE COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Board Meeting - Feb. 15, 2024

A proposed utility-scale solar project in Polk Township prompted a lively discussion during the Monroe County Conservation District's February board meeting.

Residents Janet Sooner and Linda Snyder, representing Chestnuthill and Polk townships, shared their concerns with the board regarding a proposal to convert more than 75 acres and up to 200 acres in Polk to a solar collector installation. They referred to solar farms as "metal trees."

Despite solar fields' use as non-fossil-fuel energy sources, the women lamented the loss of open space, farmland, woods, and campgrounds to make way for them.

Habitat fragmentation is a real problem, the residents said, noting the loss of songbirds. Trees, they added, are more valuable than solar farms.

District Manager Kristina Heaney pointed out that the district works "inside a box" and does not take sides on development, but rather works with developers to help plan. District technicians also monitor projects during construction to make sure they move forward within the regulations.

"We have to remain neutral because we are here for project review," Heaney said, "but we are also here for resource conservation."

Conservation districts work within their communities to promote the preservation and wise use of natural resources. They work to protect clean air, water, soil, habitats, and farmland.

Heaney told Dooner and Snyder that nearly all debates about land use start at the municipal government level. However, the district can provide expertise to residents, serving as a resource for information on land use and regulations. The district is available "to help you move forward. We try to help our partners come together and have a road map on how to go to your municipalities and make changes."

Board member Craig Todd suggested the district could hold a workshop on solar energy and solar installations.

"I really like the idea of solar power education," Heaney said.

State Rep. Tarah Prost, D-189, attended the meeting on Zoom and encouraged the women to continue their focus on the solar park proposal.

“Don’t stop fighting,” Probst said. Probst is a vocal opponent of a planned Interstate 80 lane-widening project, taking on the state Department of Transportation. She said it takes citizen commitment to influence public officials’ decisions. “It’s people like you that get the ball rolling,” she said. “Don’t think you’re too small to have a voice.”

In other business, Heaney asked for the board’s support in lobbying the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection to reach an enforcement delegation agreement with the agency.

“We’re the first boots on the ground,” responding to a complaint, she said, “And we don't have the authority to enforce....”

Heaney said when project construction does not go according to plan, threatening or causing pollution, the department asks the district, through its technical section, to encourage developers in violation to stop work and voluntarily comply.

“And they normally do,” Heaney said, but not always.

Meanwhile, she said, the DEP itself is understaffed, so the district could help by carrying out enforcement.

“We continue to follow up to assure that a pollution event is being mitigated,” Heaney said, adding that having the authority to conduct enforcement actions on the county level would help protect the resources.

And the board acknowledged the resignation of Head Resource Conservationist Lori Kerrigan. They approved a motion to advertise the position.

The next district board meeting will be at 10 a.m. Thursday, March 21.

Respectfully submitted,
Paula C. Heeschen
For the BWA