

Talia Jalette

From: Eric Bibler <ebibler@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, April 29, 2021 3:00 PM
To: Stephen Moffitt; Sharon Davis; Bob Marvel; Scott Bill Hirst; Geary, Michael J {FLNA}; Alfred W. DiOrio; James Lamphere; Emily Shumchenia; Carolyn Light; Keith Lindelow; John Pennypacker; Ron Prellwitz
Cc: Talia Jalette; Elizabeth Cook-Martin; Margaret Hogan; Stephen Sypole
Subject: URI SOLAR SURVEY RESULTS

Mr. Stephen Moffitt
Chair
Hopkinton Town Council

Mr. Alfred DiOrio
Chair
Hopkinton Planning Board

Mr. James Lamphere
Town Planner

April 29, 2021

Re: URI Solar Survey Results

Dear President Moffitt, Chairman DiOrio, Mr. Lamphere, members of the town council and planning board,

Please see below the summary report from Cynthia Drummond (former long-time reporter for the Westerly Sun), on behalf of the Beaver River Valley Community Association, of a recent URI Survey on the preferences of residents concerning the siting of commercial solar energy installations.

The survey revealed a *very* strong preference on the part of residents and consumers to avoid the construction of solar energy facilities on forest or farmland.

According to the survey, consumers were willing to pay a *very* significant premium on their electric bills to avoid encouraging the construction in either of these zones.

I found the following statement by the researcher, Corey Lange, to be a particularly apt description of the experience of Hopkinton residents during the the past few years, except that in our case, the former town council should be added as a "central actor" and the driving force behind all of the largest, and most controversial, transactions:

"Ordinary residents are often excluded or they're being minimized in a siting decision because they're not a central part of the transaction," he said. "The central actors in a transaction are the developer and the landowner and then there's the state, which is pushing for the development; it's setting incentives.

So those are the parties that are involved, but there are a lot of parties who are outside of that transaction who are still affected by some of the solar developments."

I can think of no clearer way to express the feeling of helplessness that has been experienced by the majority of Hopkinton residents in the face of the power wielded by these "central actors" over the past 3 to 5 years.

In my opinion, even though the town council has recently amended the master solar ordinance to make commercial solar energy a non-permitted use in every zone, this survey is *still* very relevant on a *forward looking* basis because there are *still* several applications for large-scale solar energy development waiting to be heard and decided by the Hopkinton planning board.

As a part of the approval decision process, the planning board is required to make a "positive finding" that each of these proposals is "consistent with the comprehensive plan" and consistent with the applicable zoning ordinances as a precondition of approval. If the planning board is unable to make these positive findings, then the board *must* deny the applications.

The results of this survey provide empirical evidence confirming what we have all learned over the recent past: Rhode Island residents and consumers *do not support* the destruction of forests and farmland for the installation of solar energy.

The findings of this survey are directly relevant to the deliberations of the planning board on all of the pending solar applications because the organizing principle of our comprehensive plan, from beginning to end, is the preservation of our natural resources and rural character of the town.

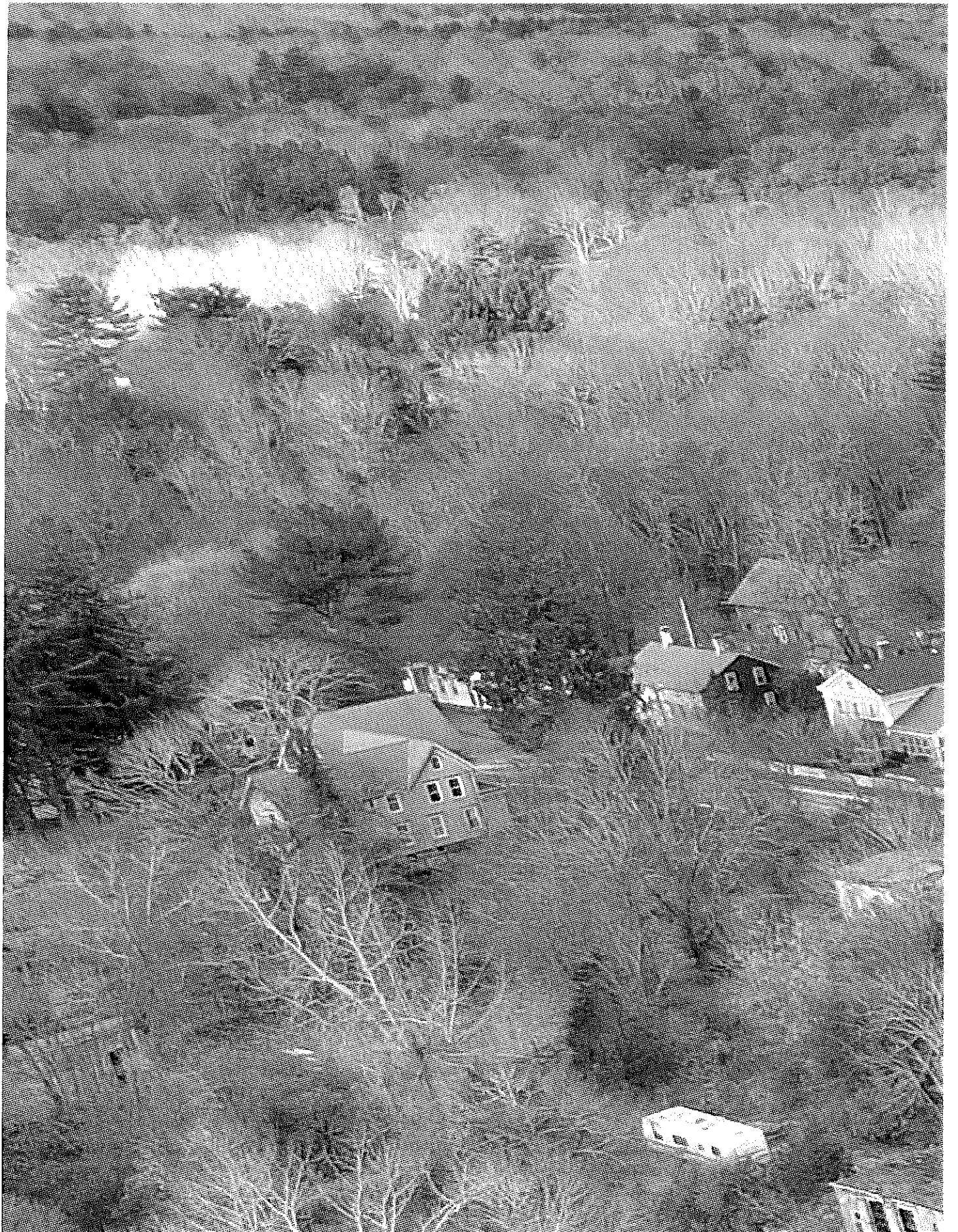
Any plan for solar development that is not consistent with these objectives is *not consistent with our comprehensive plan for development*. And according to the applicable state statute and our Code of Ordinances, any development that cannot positively be found to be "*consistent with the comprehensive plan for development*" must be denied.

In fact, as this study shows, consumers throughout Rhode Island would be willing to pay higher prices on their electric bills to persuade us to remain faithful to our comprehensive plan and to refuse to destroy valuable forests and farmland to install these industrial facilities in our town.

I hope that we will not let them down.

Eric Bibler

Date: Thu, Apr 29, 2021 at 1:37 PM
Subject: [BRVCA] UPDATE: URI SOLAR SURVEY RESULTS



Survey: Rhode Islanders willing to pay to keep large solar arrays farther from their homes

By Cynthia Drummond *for the BRVCA*

KINGSTON — Rhode Islanders polled on their preferences for the siting of commercial solar arrays said they **viewed forests and farms as the worst locations for commercial solar projects**. Participants in the three-year study were also willing to pay more for electricity to ensure that large solar arrays are kept out of open spaces.

Conducted by researchers at the **University of Rhode Island**, the study is a collaborative project involving URI's Department of Environmental and Natural Resource Economics and the College of the Environment and Life Sciences.

Entitled "**Here Comes the Sun: Incorporating Resident Preferences into Solar Siting Policy Recommendations for Rhode Island**," the project was funded by a \$300,000 grant from the United States Department of Agriculture's Institute of Food and Agriculture.

Participants were chosen from a random sample pulled from the state's voter registration records. Of the 3,000 people invited to participate, 510 responded online and 159 responded to the paper version.

Corey Lang, an associate professor in the Department of Natural and Resource Economics, presented the findings in an April 27 webinar co-hosted by Kate Venturini, program administrator at URI Cooperative Extension.

Rhode Island has ambitious renewable energy goals, Lang said, which in some cases, **have encouraged what is known as solar sprawl**.

"Starting about five-ish years ago, we started to see a real ramp-up in utility scale solar arrays being built, and it started small and then just really escalated," he said. "A lot of arrays are being proposed, and a lot are being built and that is going to help us meet those ambitious targets, but people are not always happy with the siting of these."

Lang described an issue familiar to residents of rural towns such as Richmond and Hopkinton: the clear-cutting of hundreds of acres of forest for solar energy projects.

"That strikes a lot of people as antithetical to environmental goals," Lang said. "Sometimes, they're sited on farmland and that can be beneficial to a farmer, but maybe it's inconsistent with the type of landscapes that people want."

Landfills and carparks are also potential sites for solar panels, but those sites are more expensive to develop than forests and farmers' fields. It is on those already built or environmentally-compromised sites, however, that survey participants said they preferred to see solar projects.

The goal of the survey, Lang explained, was not to advocate for or against solar energy projects but to measure people's preferences for different aspects of commercial scale solar development and then incorporate those preferences in siting decisions.

"Ordinary residents are often excluded or they're being minimized in a siting decision because they're not a central part of the transaction," he said. "The central actors in a transaction are the developer and the landowner and then there's the state, which is pushing for the development; it's setting incentives. So those are the parties that are involved, but there are a lot of parties who are outside of that transaction who are still affected by some of the solar developments."

The study also determined the values of non-monetary qualities such as rural character. One way natural resource economists measure this is by finding out how much people are willing to pay for certain amenities.

"Things like your views as you drive by, or from your house. Your preferences for open space," Lang said. "These are not things that are bought and sold, but people still care a lot about them, and so their innovative approach is to try and understand what those preferences are and put monetary values on them so that they can be brought in to the same playing fields as those other monetary benefits and costs that the developer and the landowner are talking about."

Lang described a sample survey question in which the respondent's monthly electric bill would be reduced by \$10 and the commercial solar array would not be visible, but it would be built on farmland.

"By asking people to make these tradeoffs and having a lot of different people do them, then we can understand the preferences for each of these attributes," he said.

Of all the renewable energy choices, 87% of survey respondents preferred solar, but siting was a major issue. Lang's team set out to determine people's willingness to pay higher electric bills to avoid certain siting scenarios.

"There's a pretty strong willingness to pay to avoid full visibility," Lang said. "...the average household is willing to pay \$7.30 [more] per month to avoid a fully visible solar array."

In addition to asking people to choose between different siting and project size options, the survey attempted to gauge respondents' feelings regarding residential development on those sites.

"We're making the choices difficult," Lang said. "We're forcing people to make tradeoffs between multiple things that they like or multiple things that they don't like."

Asked to rank their feelings about residential development instead of solar,

people were willing to pay more to reduce the chance of solar development, but they were more likely to prefer solar when residential development was a possibility.

Finally, survey participants were asked how much more they would be willing to pay to prevent or encourage solar development on various sites.

Four types of land were considered: farmland, commercial land, forested land and brownfields.

"People are willing to pay to avoid solar development on farm and forest land - and a lot, particularly forest land." Lang said. "... \$40 per month people are willing to pay to avoid that development happening on forested land."

Respondents were also willing to pay more to encourage the building of solar arrays on commercial land and contaminated sites.

Now that the study has documented Rhode Islanders' preferences, Lang said he hoped a way would be found to include that information in Rhode Island's energy policy.

"What we have is a set of incentives, per kilowatt hour, that are justified by people's preferences, and so, as we think about how we incorporate people's preferences, this is it," Lang said. "This is offering incentives to the developers to move development from forest to commercial."

Venturini said the **survey results would be shared with state and municipal policy-makers.**

"Get it into the hands of the people who are, bless them, tasked with making these decisions that have a 25 year or more impact on environmental function and land use and tax revenue," she said.

cynthiadrummond20@gmail.com

Please contact the Beaver River Valley Community Association

at BeaverRiverValley@gmail.com

or go to www.brvc.com