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Allen Auglaize Coalition for Reasonable Energy

Commissioners Seibert, Noonan, and Winegardner, I thank you for this opportunity to address you. In speaking with Commissioner Seibert to arrange this meeting, I asked what we might speak to that would possibly be of benefit to you. She suggested your letter of June 30 to the Ohio Power Siting Board. It is in direct response to that letter that I have prepared my remarks.

Imagine you are a farmer, part of a long family tradition extending back to the years before Abraham Lincoln was president. Your family has lived on, farmed on, and cared for your land in Allen County for six generations. You've watched as newcomers have drifted into the neighborhood over the years, purchasing farmland and turning it into home sites and commercial enterprises. You've not said anything. After all, private property rights is an American thing; a matter of personal liberty; something hand in glove with "the pursuit of happiness".

You're worried as you conclude you're growing older and your children haven't the desire to continue to work the land. You wonder what the future may hold: "Will my grandchildren want to farm? Have we come to the end of the line? How will I feel if my family no longer owns this land?"

Then, after years of listening to one offer after another, one more scheme for extraction of riches from the land of your grandfathers, you are presented with an offer to lease your land for a solar farm. The corporation proposing the deal seems more competent and better prepared than others and there are advantages a solar farm would bring:

- The land will be preserved and may be returned to farming at the end of life of the project.
- The land will lie fallow and rest over that period, something you know in your heart is a good idea and in the best interests of the soil you have worked all your life, for which you care so deeply.

- The land will continue to belong to your family and may be passed down to future generations as it was passed down to you.

After thoughtful conversation with your family and extensive discussion with the solar company, you decide to accept the offer, knowing you have done the right thing for your family and community. You've chosen the best alternative among the many presented to you over the last several years.

Suddenly, you are blindsided by the vigor and vitriol that the announcement of the project unearths among some of your neighbors. Neighbors who, although they possess no legal right, assume the mantle of arbiters of what is or is not considered “rural” and what you can do with your farmland; although most of them are people who have come in and converted local farmland into home sites; land never to be farmed again.

You are confounded as they work to deploy legislators to alter the rules of the game after it begins and are disappointed as you see local officials accosted by and listening to those who oppose the project while they seem to ignore or discount those who support you.

I have sat and imagined myself as that farmer. I have spoken to that farmer. And I'm here today to support that farmer and share that I, too, believe that this solar project can bring incredible value to our children and youth, to our local workers, and to our community. I urge you to work for the best outcome for our county and not blindly oppose a project that could bring so much benefit to us all because of the accosting nature of a vocal minority of residents of our county.

I read your letter to the Ohio Power Siting Board with great interest and see that you are relaying items of concern you've heard from these residents yet, I took note that the support we have indicated to you for this project was absent from your letter. Still, Allen Auglaize Coalition for Reasonable Energy have more than one hundred signs in the yards of Allen and Auglaize County residents showing their support for solar and our members are knocking on doors throughout the counties and discussing this project with residents at their homes.

To our surprise, we have found that most residents possess but little knowledge or understanding of the project. However, when the effects of the increased revenue generated by the project are explained, we find most residents support it. In Shawnee Township you are probably aware of our recent history of school levies, a police levy, a school renewal levy this fall, talk of a fire levy, and an expressed need for new school buildings. People are sensitive to the continuing requests for

more and more money and fail to understand why a project that will bring millions of dollars in new revenue is opposed.

We ask you to take more time, talk to all interested parties, don't fall for the myths and misinformation that are promoted and be careful not to be persuaded by any political fear tactics that renewable energy opponents sometimes deploy. Finally, I encourage you to file our constituent response with the Ohio Power Siting Board as an addendum to your previous letter. We have not provided this document to them.

I thank you for providing us this opportunity and will now speak directly to the specific issues raised in your letter to the OPSB. I am pleased to do so.

1. The energy from this project is not available for local development, as it has been sold to an out-of-state entity.

We have heard this point brought forward by several people, sometimes in absurd fashion as in, "This project has no local economic benefit".

It is our belief that this point reveals a fundamental misunderstanding as to how the electrical grid works. To check our thinking on this, we contacted the American Electric Power corporation and asked if they agreed with our characterization that the power grid is better understood as a lake. When you use water, that is electricity, you withdraw it from the lake. But you pay for it by paying someone else to put water in the lake, replacing what you have taken out. This is easy to understand in Ohio, a deregulated state, where the distributor and the generator of electricity are two separate entities, as required by law.

Now, a project such as Birch Solar I will generate an enormous amount of electricity; **more than the amount consumed by all the homes in Allen County**. To extend the metaphor, that is as though a new source of water, a spring, has been discovered right here that will flood the lake with clean water for us all. The fact that someone, somewhere else will be paying for the spring is irrelevant to us. The fact is that the water will be here and will ensure a steady, reliable supply locally. AEP personnel said this was quite a good metaphor to explain how the grid operates.

Having a huge supply of electricity available right here is a positive thing for current local customers and for local development. The problems in Texas last winter provide a good illustration of the possibilities in store for those without reliable, stable, local sources. We would be foolish to turn our backs on the extraordinary benefits this would bring to our local energy situation.

And, as I mentioned earlier, it has been said to us, "**This project has no**

local economic benefit". We have tested this claim in front of several other people, all of whom responded, "That is absurd". It is analogous to a farmer raising beans and selling them to Cargill who take them to China. If that has no local economic impact then we might as well do without farmers as, apparently, paying property, income, and sales taxes, buying supplies, buying and maintaining ag equipment, and borrowing money are totally worthless to the local community. The statement is absurd.

If Ford sells engines to Canada, if American Trim pieces go into appliances purchased in Idaho, if Bob Evans sells mashed potatoes to New Jersey is there no benefit to us locally? It's absurd! I mean, how much of anything manufactured locally is purchased locally?

And what about the estimated 600 man-years of labor required to build the solar farm. I can tell you that our conversations with the local International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 32 have been all about the local economic impact of the project.

2. **Local zoning regulations and the Shawnee Township Comprehensive Plan were deemed irrelevant to the process, which is unacceptable considering the 1,410 acre footprint of the project.**

Your letter states that "Residents of Shawnee Township view this as an assault on the township's zoning regulations and their comprehensive plan...". Of course, this is inaccurate but, as you did not afford us the opportunity of speaking with you before you crafted your letter and sent it to the OPSB, how could you have known that not all residents of Shawnee Township feel this way?

Our group represents residents who believe that the Birch Solar I project is likely **the best alternative available for maintaining the character of the area.**

First of all, we find it convincing that the proposed fencing and plantings will preserve the visual aspects of our rural area. Wetlands and woodlands will be left as they are. Secondly, the panel assemblies are not tall and area residents are accustomed to the similar height of corn plants. Along with the proposed pollinator and native plantings, an environment more natural than current agriculture practices permit seem likely to increase the rural character of the area.

Also, there seems to persist an unrealistic expectation that the disapproval of Birch Solar I will result in the land being used in the same manner as it is used at present for the next thirty years, without alteration. This can hardly be realistic. Consider that the area already is home to an HVAC service facility, a water park, a dog kennel, a junk car property, and an electric power substation. The pressures to continue in this vein are not likely to subside. As one of the landowners remarked to me, "I always find

it ironic that someone doesn't want to see farm land developed but yet their house was built on farmland." Landowners tell me that they have already been approached with several schemes to develop their land in other ways such as bases for steel transmission towers bringing electricity from Van Wert County and development of residential subdivisions. After hearing presentations over the course of several years, the landowners chose Birch Solar I as the right project at the right time, a project that will keep the area rural and preserve it for agricultural use. Should it not win approval, we can all assume that some other, likely less desirable project will be right on its heels. I mean, we could see a CAFO hog farm go in, something totally in keeping with the rural character of the area, but would that be a more satisfactory alternative and a positive driver of property values?

3. The timing of 2021 property sexennial full valuation updates could unfairly be used to the advantage of the Birch Solar I project, as increases in property values would incorrectly have the appearance to have occurred after the project start.

How is this unfair? We used to refer to such things as "the luck of the draw". It is what it is. It could just as easily worked out another way. That would be our first response to this point.

Upon further examination, one begins to wonder what is being discussed here. First, it is stated that, "The property owners near the proposed project have serious concerns as to the negative effects the proposal will have on their land values." Yet, the narrative goes on to relate that, "The average increase for tax year 2021 for residences within this project area are likely to be significantly higher than the average with Allen County."

I simply cannot follow this. Are you worried about property values going down or property values going up? The "good neighbor" agreements offered by the company to compensate adjoining landowners bordered on as little as even one side or a guaranteed home purchase at market value good for a year would seem to address this issue.

What is most difficult for us to comprehend is why this is a matter for the county commissioners. If the home owners wish to negotiate with the company, why don't they approach the company with their concerns?

Let me relate a true story. One of our group had a conversation with a property owner who will be bordered on one side by the Birch Solar Farm. A "Stop Industrial Solar" yard sign was in her front yard. However, she related, "I'm looking forward to the Solar Farm." When it was pointed out that her words contradicted the sign in her yard, she replied, "Oh, they asked if they could put a sign in my yard so I just said, 'Yes', but I'm looking forward to the \$10,000 I'm going to get for having the farm on one side of my property!"

Also, as regards property values, it has been pointed out that there are many residences within one mile of the project area. However, it should also be pointed out that many of these same residences are within three miles of the large petrochemical facilities south of Lima. I have served as a citizen representative for over three decades on Allen County Public Health's Environmental Citizens Advisory Committee (ECAC), which serves as a liaison between the community and those facilities. Consequently, I know that Allen County has spent many years ranked among the top ten counties in the state of Ohio on the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency's Toxic Chemical Release Inventory, some years ranked as the number one county in Ohio for total toxic releases, largely as a result of the chemical releases from these facilities. Frankly, the idea that property values could be substantially impacted because of environmental concerns from fields of sealed solar panels seems preposterous when compared to the environmental risks associated with living within a few miles of some of the largest toxic polluters in the state of Ohio. Yet, many high value properties lay within a short distance of these facilities; Shawnee Country Club is less than a mile away.

To demonstrate the level of concern I have regarding these facilities, I can relate that I grew up within a half mile of the facilities and I chose to live within three miles of the petrochemical plants. I will be within two miles of the Birch Solar I project and I have no real concerns about it.

4. The decommissioning plan is inadequate and needs to be bonded based on the number of modules and disposal.

This is a point of some merit. The preservation of the farmland and the ability to return it to crop farming is an important point to us. Assuring that the resources are in place to accomplish this is simply good planning. We have heard that Sub. SB 52 has altered the terms of the decommissioning requirements and in what we feel is a positive way. We believe that the new bill addresses these concerns but it is currently not law as it awaits the Governor's signature.

If it is not signed, we urge you to continue to urge the company through the OPSB to adopt the improved standards in the bill.

5. Annual drinking water assessment of private wells needs to be provided to the 338 homes surrounding the project due to serious concerns about groundwater impacts.

Certainly the claims made concerning the depositing of heavy metals into the ground seem unrealistic to us. We've heard some say that solar arrays could contaminate soil with chemicals such as lead or cadmium. However, solar panels are fully sealed and computers flag any panels not performing properly for replacement. We do not consider this an issue and do not come

across it as an issue in functioning solar farms.

However, we find it to be true that some people seem genuinely worried about this. An offer such as this on the part of the corporation would be seen as a neighborly gesture of good faith to build confidence in both the project and the corporation.

We urge you to engage with Birch Solar to obtain their agreement to this proposal.

6. A road use and maintenance agreement is not defined in the OPSB application and does not exist between the applicant and Allen County, Ohio as of the date of this letter.

Again, this seems a point of some merit and it is particularly positive to hear that County personnel are examining this and working on it, as one would expect. It is our understanding that the PILOT agreement negotiations most often include a Road Use and Maintenance Agreement (RUMA) between the developer and the county.

One hopes that the Office of the Engineer will actively engage with the company in formulating the agreement. One is exasperated by the claims made by others that, “We never received this or that document” when it turns out they never asked for the documents. Our experience in working with the developer – an experience shared by the local school districts who will be impacted, the IBEW Local 32 here in Lima, and the Audubon Society – has been both positive and informative and has demonstrated a willingness on the part of Birch Solar to inform and discuss concerns in the spirit of finding a workable outcome. This project will do a lot for our community. Let's make certain it is done as well as possible and with just as much goodwill and cooperation.

7. Existing drainage issues to be exacerbated with the addition of solar panels.

Again, this is a point of some merit. It is particularly good to have it established by your document that drainage (flash flooding) is currently an issue in the area. It is our understanding that Birch Solar will be obligated and legally bound by its permit not to exacerbate existing problems. And, again, one hopes that the County Engineer will actively engage the company to explore these issues now that the application has been filed. Has the County Engineer notified Birch Solar as to what specific information is sought?

8. Alternative Energy Tax Exemption (Preferential Tax Treatment)

It is our understanding that the statement made by Ms. Montana is one for which she has both acknowledged the inaccuracy of and apologized for. Sometimes mistakes are made.

As for the statement in the application, “The Applicant anticipates entering

into a PILOT in Allen and Auglaize Counties...". Certainly we can all acknowledge the likelihood of the acceptance of a PILOT agreement because of the large difference it will make to the benefit of the Shawnee Local Schools, which is currently a "capped" district under the Ohio school funding formula. Without a PILOT, the aid to Shawnee Local Schools would be considerably reduced. The schools know it, you know it, Birch Solar knows it, and we know it. In other words, while not a certainty, we all anticipate a PILOT agreement. We can understand how you may have felt in a state of pique at the comment made in November. However, there comes a time to let things go and move ahead in the best interests of the community.

As we know you have contracted to have the PILOT agreement evaluated, something for which we applaud you for exercising due diligence, we do not feel the need to point out the other, several advantages the PILOT brings to our local schools and governments.

That concludes my remarks, I thank you for your attention.

I will now yield to Kathleen Baril, another of our group, who will offer the perspective of a parent with school children in Shawnee Township.

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