

Solar Energy Comprehensive Plan Amendments – FINAL DRAFT

To be added to *Utilities: Introduction, Historic and Current Conditions and Trends*

Solar Energy Systems

Solar energy is a natural resource that has been utilized at residential scales for decades as an alternative to energy generated by the burning of fossil fuels or other sources. New technological innovations have made the collection, processing, and storage of solar energy more efficient and have allowed for an increase in scale of collection to larger solar farms and storage facilities. The passage of the Virginia Clean Economy Act by the General Assembly in 2020 precipitated an increase in the development of large-scale solar energy systems throughout the Commonwealth.

Large scale solar energy systems not only provide an alternative energy source, but also provide commercial opportunities to developers and property owners, through land-lease programs for the installation of these systems. Advancements in the solar industry have also provided land owners the opportunity to combine solar energy systems with other agricultural uses on property to promote dual use.

At the request of the Board of Supervisors, County staff worked with members of the Planning Commission and community stakeholders to develop a comprehensive approach to address solar energy systems within the County. The Planning Commission's charge was to adopt goals and strategies to manage the development of facilities for the generation, conversion, and storage of solar energy. These goals and strategies are intended to balance the potential impacts of these types of facilities and the preservation of the natural, cultural, and scenic resources of the County's rural areas.

To be added to *Utilities: Goals*

UTL 2.4 Solar Energy Systems. Provide opportunities for the use of residential, commercial, and utility scale renewable energy, through solar energy facilities and battery storage facilities, while minimizing the impact of such facilities on the County's view shed and natural, agricultural, cultural, and historic resources.

2.4.1 Balanced Land Uses. To ensure that solar energy facilities and battery storage facilities are part of a balanced development approach within the County, the County desires to have no more than 4,500 cumulative acres occupied by solar energy and battery storage facilities throughout the County.

2.4.2 Encourage Shared Agricultural Use. To ensure continued use of agricultural lands for farming within the County, solar energy and battery storage facilities within the County should include shared agricultural uses, such as grazing, agri-photovoltaics (APV), compatible crops, and/or ground cover that facilitates habitats for non-invasive native species and native pollinators.

2.4.3 Encourage Future Agricultural Use. To ensure that agricultural lands used for solar energy and battery storage systems may be returned to an active state of agricultural use in the future, top soil should be retained on all project sites housing these systems within the County.

2.4.4 Project Scale. The size of solar energy and battery storage facilities should be carefully considered to ensure that the projects have no undue adverse impacts on nearby residential, commercial, and mixed-use properties.

2.4.5 Project Siting. The location of solar energy and battery storage facilities should be carefully considered to ensure that existing infrastructure resources are best utilized and that impacts to agricultural, cultural, and historic resources are minimized.

2.4.5a. Rural and Resource Stewardship Areas. Siting of projects in areas designated as Rural and Resource Stewardship within the Comprehensive Plan should consider the presence of prime farmland producing soils or other natural resources. Further, projects should be highly discouraged within Agricultural and Forestal Districts and in areas held within a Conservation Easement. Projects located outside, but adjacent to, these areas, should be evaluated for any potential visual or other impacts associated with development.

2.4.5c. Historic and Cultural Heritage Areas. Siting of projects in state or federally designated Historic Districts should be highly discouraged. Projects located outside, but adjacent to, these areas should be evaluated for any potential visual or other impacts associated with development.

2.4.5c. Growth Areas. In order to ensure existing and future planned infrastructure is utilized to facilitate planned growth within the County, siting of solar energy and battery storage facilities should be highly discouraged within areas designated as Residential Transition, Urban Expansion, Village Expansion, and within Urban Development Areas.

2.4.5d. Utilization of Land with Limited Development Potential. Siting of projects on lands that have increased limitations for development (brownfields, reclaimed coal mining sites, abandoned industrial sites, or agricultural lands with soil classifications not conducive to active farming) should be encouraged.

2.4.5e. Resource Considerations. Projects should be designed, sited, and constructed in a manner that carefully considers and endeavors to minimize negative impacts to the County's natural, scenic, and cultural resources, including:

- i. Fertile Soils
- ii. View sheds
- iii. Streams, rivers, and wetlands
- iv. Natural habitats
- v. Native vegetation
- vi. Forests
- vii. Historic and archaeological resources
- viii. Parks and recreational areas
- ix. Federal lands