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Jane Porter
Parish Clerk
Ashwell Parish Council

By email: clerk@ashwell.gov.uk

26 August 2021

Dear Jane,

Proposed Tophams Solar Farm, Land at Ashwell Road, Bygrave

I am writing to let you know that Pathfinder Clean Energy UKDev Ltd will shortly be bringing forward a proposal for a solar farm with battery energy storage on Land at Ashwell Road, Bygrave, Letchworth, Herts, SG7 5EB. Although just outside of your Parish, we thought it might be of interest to you and your councillors.

Facilities like these enable this country's low carbon and renewable energy strategy. As you may know, the Government has committed to a target of *"net zero carbon emissions"* and a transition away from fossil fuels for energy supply. Increasingly, renewable energy facilities provide the backbone of this new approach and solar farms such as that proposed at Ashwell Road are vital in enabling this.

Due to current restrictions we are not able to hold a public event, but we are launching a project website (www.tophamssolar.co.uk) and we are in the process of notifying residents in the local area. This contains details of our proposals, but in summary:

- It will displace over 11,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide every year, which will make an invaluable contribution to delivering net zero emissions and addressing the IPCC's recent stark warnings of increasingly extreme heatwaves, droughts and flooding, and a key temperature limit being broken in just over a decade.
- It will generate enough renewable energy to power over 15,700 homes a year. This will serve existing properties as well as the planned new development in the area.
- Solar panels are safe with no known health risks.
- The batteries are safe and similar to those used in phones and laptops and help reduce risks of power cuts by storing and then releasing energy at times of high demand.
- Once operational, there will be almost no traffic. Construction traffic will not pass through Bygrave and the timescale will be short, lasting 20-30 weeks, thereby minimising disruption to road users and residential properties.

- Solar farms take up a very small proportion of the land they occupy, leaving huge scope for biodiversity enhancements and continued agriculture. Our aim is for the scheme to be ecology-led. We have proposed a biodiversity scheme below and would welcome your suggestions for improvements.
- The site is already well screened from the village of Bygrave and new trees and hedges will be planted to minimise visibility from homes and footpaths.

Some of the features and benefits of the proposed development - A high resolution version is available on the website (www.tophamssolar.co.uk)

Several sites were considered in the area before the Ashwell Road site was selected as the most appropriate location. The area has capacity to connect a development to the local electricity grid and the proposed fields will have limited visual or heritage impacts.

The solar panels, batteries and other equipment are kept low to the ground and will be surrounded by existing and new trees and hedgerows. Visibility of the development from the settlements of Bygrave and Ashwell will be very limited.

Artist impression of the view from the bridleway in the south-east corner of the site.

It will not be necessary to remove any trees or hedges, and the land beneath the panels will be available for grazing livestock and biodiversity improvements. In fact, an assessment using Natural England's Biodiversity Net Gain calculator has demonstrated that proposed biodiversity measures will increase habitat by 125%, by creating new meadows, and increase hedgerows by over 40%.

Ecological surveys have informed the choice of location and will ensure that no sensitive habitats are affected. Solar farms bring considerable biodiversity benefits and we would welcome your suggestions for improving our proposed biodiversity plan, which include the following measures:

- Setting the development back a considerable distance from the south-east corner, closest to homes on the edge of Bygrave. New hedges will be planted to minimise visibility of the development and land left fallow with no public access to benefit ground nesting birds, butterflies, bees, and other species.
- Leaving the southern end free of development and creating a new seating area along the bridleway in the south-west corner to maintain panoramic views to the north, and development set well back along the entire length of the path.
- Wide field margins will be retained all around the development to create connectivity between habitats.
- Land around the solar panels will be planted with wildflower meadow seeds.
- Sheep will be able to graze around the solar panels during operation. Stocking will be managed to balance continued agriculture with biodiversity improvements.
- A wide space will be left along the northern boundary with Cat Ditch to avoid any risk of flooding and to support biodiversity.

The reduction in intensive farming will remove the need for chemical fertilisers and pesticides, which will allow the land to rejuvenate naturally and leave its quality improved once the solar farm is removed. The proposed development has a likely lifespan of 40 years, and the site will be fully restored at the end of this.

The proposals will include solar photovoltaic panels measuring up to 3m high at their tips, associated infrastructure including inverters and transformers, and surrounded by a 2m high post and wire fence, of a type typical in the countryside.

The site will export approximately 40MW renewable electricity to homes and businesses via an underground connection to the local electricity grid. This is enough to power around 15,700 homes each year, and will displace over 11,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide every year.

It will also include 14 battery containers so that excess energy can be stored and distributed to the grid at times of high demand, thereby helping to reduce the risk of power cuts. The containers will be around 3m high. The batteries will use similar technology to mobile phone and laptop batteries, and do not contain hazardous materials. Neither the batteries or solar panels contain moving parts, they are safe and do not produce emissions. The project will be constructed to all UK and European safety standards.

We have commissioned a comprehensive set of surveys to help determine the site area and layout, so that impacts on residents can be minimised, and to identify opportunities for improving the proposals. These include:

- Landscape and visual impact assessment – this has helped us determine the maximum extent of the development, the position of equipment, and where we should plant new trees and hedgerows to minimise visibility into the site.
- Heritage and archaeology assessment – these have considered listed buildings and scheduled monuments in the area. A geophysical survey has been undertaken to help us assess the potential for archaeological features below the ground.
- Ecological appraisal – we have used this to identify wildlife habitats and protected species on and around the site and significant opportunities for the solar farm to benefit biodiversity.
- Construction traffic assessment and management plan – this has confirmed the most suitable route to avoid construction traffic passing through Bygrave.
- Analysis of agricultural land grade – farming can continue alongside operation of the solar farm and the quality of the soil will be improved by reducing chemical inputs and the intensity of agriculture during operation.
- Flood risk and drainage survey – we used this to identify any parts of the site that might be at risk of flooding. As a result, no solar panels have been placed in the part of the site closest to Cat Ditch and will instead be left fallow and managed for biodiversity. The solar farm will not increase the risk of flooding to roads or properties in the area.

More information can be found on our project website (www.tophamssolar.co.uk) and includes a feedback form.

Members of the project team will be very happy to speak with you and other Parish Council members, either by phone or video call if we cannot meet in person. Please email me or call using the details below. We will also be directing members of the public to our website.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Faithfully,

Rob Shaw
PACE - Pathfinder Clean Energy

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