Despite delays, solar farms ready to shine

By FINN HARTNETT
Staff writer

It hasn't been all blue skies for Hillsboro's and Marion's proposed solar farms since the cities agreed to lease the land to Kansas Power Pool in late 2023.

The solar farms have faced lengthy bureaucratic roadblocks, and the opening date for the farms is now June 2026, a year and a half later than planned.

But the sun has been shining brighter recently.

According to KPP chief operating officer James Ging, there is just one step to go before construction can begin.

"We're waiting for some releases from USDA for the environmental studies," Ging said. "Once we have that, we'll be able to start."

Marion's solar farm will be just north of the county transfer station. Hillsboro's will be just west of its wastewater facility on Kanza Rd. and 200th St.

The farms will cover about six acres each.

Because of tax credits KPP is receiving — and a $35 million government loan subsidizing the project — the projects are subject to federal regulations, including environmental reviews to make sure surrounding land is not impacted.

The Marion solar farm will be built north of the county transfer station and operational around June 2026.

The reviews, beginning 10 months ago, have been lengthy and extensive. KPP even had to hire an archeologist to dig around the Hillsboro site in case there were historical artifacts below the dirt.

He did not find any, Ging said.

Ging expects the environmental reviews to come back clean.

Still, USDA has been taking its time. KPP's last comments were presented around Christmastime, Ging said.

The delay is just one more in a project full of them.

Hillsboro city administrator Matt Stiles said in January, 2024, that he hoped Hillsboro's solar farm might be operational by the end of 2024. Ging now says it will take until June 2026.

"There were delays with USDA getting the final reports, some questions about whether or not it was going to move forward, and some delays sourcing the materials," Stiles said.

The amount of time USDA is taking is partially attributable to a change in presidential administration, and President Trump's pause Jan. 27 on U.S. grant funding.

The pause was halted by a judge the next day but nonetheless backed things up.

Ging is slightly concerned the administration might pause funding again. However, because the project began in 2024, "all indications are that we have safe harbor," he said.

While solar farms won't be dominating the county electric grid anytime soon, they will be pretty powerful.

Each will produce one megawatt of energy a month at their peak. That's enough to power about 250 homes for the same period.

In addition to adding more capacity to cities they serve, the farms will be "a hedge for rising costs" and a buffer during peak usage hours, Ging said.

The Southwest Power Grid requires its electric utility to have 116% of its capacity secured, Ging said, in case there is a surge in usage.

A hot summer day when everyone is cranking the air conditioning is the most obvious example.

The solar farms will be called upon in those instances.

"It's like putting more gas in the tank," Stiles said.

The farms will not produce as much energy in cloudy or wintery weather (though snow reflects a surprising amount of light and can provide power). However, people tend to use less electricity in winter.

"We are a summer-peaking utility," Ging said.

When the county's farms are operational, residents may reap the rewards of cheaper bills.

But with the Trump administration favoring coal and natural gas, solar farms may become less viable in the future — and solar energy isn't profitable without subsidies.

The KPP project's "when" could still become an "if".

"I'm not counting those chickens until I get the check," Stiles said.

Nearing the finish line

STAFF PHOTO BY PHYLLIS ZORN

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Workers are nearly finished with a long-delayed repair of Marion's Locust St. north of Main St. Erosion had left as much as eight feet of a box bridge under the street hanging in the air and endangered a retaining wall at the edge of the street. The state awarded a grant that would pay 70% of the $290,727 cost of repairs, plus new curbing from Lawrence to Main Sts. in October, 2022. Work began two weeks ago. Elm St. will be closed next week to excavate existing drainage pipes beneath the street and replace it with new pipes. Curbing also will be replaced. The same 70% grant for the Locust St. work includes the Elm St. work.

County accused of circumventing planning panel

By PHYLLIS ZORN
Staff writer

Florence resident and one-time wind farm developer Rex Savage expressed his disappointment Monday of attempts to extend a wind farm moratorium.

He told commissioners that he was disappointed when he and his wife returned from a trip and read that commissioners voted to have counsel Brad Jantz draft an extension to a moratorium passed a year ago.

"As anyone can guess, I am not pleased with it," Savage said.

Commissioners want to discuss the draft again after a public hearing May 24 on changes commissioner Clarke Dirks wants made to wind farm regulations.

Savage reminded commissioners that the county established its planning and zoning commission in the 1980s to make regulations. When rules are amended in a top-down manner, he said, the result can be expensive litigation.

He accused commissioners of lack of faith in volunteers who give hours of time to serve on the commission.

Discussing the topic at a public hearing is good for everyone, Savage said.

"If you will let people speak on what they want and don't want, when they go away, whether they agree or disagree, they will accept the decision," Savage said. "Let the process work."

In other business Monday, Hillsboro city administrator Matt Stiles talked to commissioners about a housing development in Hillsboro.

"The good thing is, I'm here to ask you do nothing," Stiles said. "Just nothing. It's probably the easiest thing you've done all day."

Stiles outlined Hillsboro's agreement with Mennonite Housing to build 12 duplexes on Orchard St. south of Dollar General.

Although the units will not be specifically for low-income renters, rent will be based on tenant income. Two- and three-bedroom duplexes are estimated to rent for $600 to $700 a month.

Mennonite Housing will manage the complex for at least 40 years.

Orchard Ridge Development's potential property tax revenue would be $1.98 million over Mennonite Housing's minimum ownership, he said.

A public hearing at 4 p.m. May 6 will be followed by a 30-day objection period for taxing entities.

"The City of Hillsboro requests Marion County take no action and make no objection," Stiles said. "An objection would halt the project."

Commissioners did not indicate whether they might object.

Buyers quickly snatch up property at sheriff's sale

By PHYLLIS ZORN
Staff writer

In a sale lasting just more than half an hour, buyers at Thursday's tax foreclosure action picked up houses for as little as $6,000 and empty lots for as little as $150.

Before the sale, 131 bidders registered to bid on 16 parcels of real estate and mineral rights.

One man came in to register a few minutes too late to get a bidding card.

Some bidders had particular parcels in mind, and some were there to see what deals they could get.

Rod Johnson bought mineral rights to property near Aulne.

His father, Eugene, owned the land but not the mineral rights being sold.

"It's an old rock quarry," Eugene Johnson said. "It's nothing but wasteland, but he's got a house on it."

Sheriff Jeff Soyez took bids starting at $50, then moved up to $1,000 bids. For properties with several bidders, he jumped up to $1,500 increments.

A two-bedroom house in the 400 block of S. 4th St. in Marion, appraised for $28,000, sold for $14,000.

A different two-bedroom house in Marion, 15 years newer and in the 400 block of S. Lincoln St., also appraised at $28,000, sold for $10,000.

A smaller two-bedroom house in Peabody, in the 200 block of E. 4th St., appraised at $20,290, sold for $6,000.

Houses sold included:

- 101 S. Birch St., Hillsboro.
- 207 E. 4th St., Peabody.
- 209 W. 4th St., Florence.
- 217 E. 4th St., Florence.

STAFF PHOTO BY PHYLLIS ZORN

Bidders wait for properties they want Thursday at a tax foreclosure auction conducted by Sheriff Jeff Soyez.

- 303 W. Marion, Lehigh.
- 305 N. C St., Ramona.
- 328 N. Lincoln St., Marion.
- 413 S. 4th St., Marion.
- 420 N. Lincoln St., Marion.

A retail building at 400 W. Main St., Lincolnville, also was auctioned.

Vacant lots on the sale list included:

- N. Poplar St., Peabody.
- W. 5th St., Florence.
- 501 S. 4th St., Marion.
- 210 S. Vernon St., Lehigh.
- 620 Barker St., Florence.
- 311 N. Lincoln St., Hillsboro.

Sales will be final after confirmed by the district court in about two weeks.

In all, the sale raised $61,350.