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THE BUFFALO NEWS



Joseph Ohol, left, and sons John, center, and Steven, say they are no longer making money on the Cambria farm that has been in their family for eight decades. The family is leasing some land for the Bear Ridge Solar project. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Solar developer leased land it needs for Niagara County project

By Thomas J. Prohaska (https://buffalonews.com/author/thomas_prohaska/) | Published October 4, 2018 | Updated October 4, 2018

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The project manager for the Bear Ridge Solar project said Wednesday that all 900 acres needed for the giant solar power complex have been leased, and the company soon will advance to the state approval process for its project.

Kevin Kohlstedt, a project manager at Cypress Creek Renewables, said the California company that has developed solar projects all over the nation has signed deals to use land in Cambria and Pendleton for the project, which will have a maximum output of 100 megawatts.

That would be enough to power 25,000 homes, according to a calculation system used by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

The solar arrays would be located in an area roughly bounded by Upper Mountain, Junction, Comstock and Lockport roads, Kohlstedt said. Some of the land under lease is on the south side of Lockport Road, which marks the Cambria-Pendleton border.

Kohlstedt made his comments at an open house held by the company Wednesday at Niagara County Community College. Another such meeting was scheduled for Thursday afternoon in the Cambria Volunteer Fire Company hall.

Kohlstedt said Cypress Creek is committing to keep all power generated at the Bear Ridge project in Western New York. One way of doing that would be to find a major customer who wants to buy it.

"We intend to find a large energy user, such as a hospital, a university or a data center," Kohlstedt said.

Article 10 of the state Public Service Law sets up a siting board process. That board has the power to override any local laws that stand in the way of any renewable energy project.

It's the same process that has generated a bitter controversy in Somerset and Yates over a giant wind power project proposed by Apex Clean Energy, with the towns' elected officials leading the fight against the plan. But so far in Cambria and Pendleton, there has been little sign of such a battle.

"I'm keeping a very open mind so far," Cambria Supervisor Wright H. Ellis said at the NCCC session.



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Cambria has a solar power law that restricts large-scale solar projects to industrial zones, but not all the land Cypress Creek has leased is located in such zones.

"If the siting board approves it, you in effect are rezoning (land) from agricultural-residential to industrial," Ellis said.

Kohlstedt wouldn't reveal the exact amount of the lease payments, except to say the company is paying "four figures" a year for each acre. But Cambria Councilman Joseph Ohol told The Buffalo News in July that the price was \$1,500 an acre. The leases are for 20 years with renewal options for another 20 years.

The News previously reported that landowners who have signed up include John and Thomas Ohol, respectively Joseph Ohol's son and brother.

Kohlstedt said others include Francis Barone, owner of land along a CSX railroad line in Cambria, and Pencam Properties, which owns about 200 acres of open land on Lockport Road.

According to public records, Pencam is headquartered at the same address as Cambria Contracting, a local construction company.

"It's stabilizing income for farmers in the area," Kohlstedt said. "They can farm other land and keep the (leased) land in their family for generations to come."

Nina Nanula, a local realtor, attended the session and said she has heard from homeowners wondering how the Bear Ridge project might affect property values.

"We found from other projects that property values actually remain kind of stable," Kohlstedt commented.

Cypress Creek has developed 25 other projects in New York alone, he said.

The land leased for the project is in a fairly contiguous area, much of it near existing high-tension power lines off Lockport and Saunders Settlement roads.

"We like it to be as contiguous as possible. That cuts down on the amount of electric lines we need," Kohlstedt said.

Cypress Creek has said it is willing to negotiate host community payments to Cambria and Pendleton. State law allows taxing entities to opt out of tax breaks

required for green energy projects, but Ellis, the Cambria supervisor, said town probably won't do that.

"If you opt out, you've got to opt out for all the residential (solar projects), too," Ellis said.

Although it's using the state siting board process, Kohlstedt said Cypress Creek intends to obey the provisions of the Cambria and Pendleton zoning codes regarding required setbacks from property lines for ground-based solar panels.

The company intends to begin the state approval process by submitting a preliminary scoping statement to the Department of Public Service in January. The final, formal application is expected in late 2019, Kohlstedt said.

If the state board approves the project, construction should take 12 to 16 months, he said.



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Prohaska – *Thomas Prohaska has been a reporter for The Buffalo News since 1995. A graduate of Starpoint Central High School and St. Bonaventure University, he previously worked at WLVL Radio in Lockport.*

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