



**Department of Development Services**

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**Butte County Board of Supervisors  
AGENDA REPORT  
Draft Butte Utility Scale Solar Guide**

**DATE:** September 26, 2017  
**TO:** Butte County Board of Supervisors  
**FROM:** Tim Snellings, Development Services Director  
**RE:** **Final Recommendation on the Draft Butte Utility-Scale Solar Guide  
(Sustainable Communities Planning Grant)**

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**I. RECOMMENDATION**

Adopt the Resolution approving the Butte Utility-Scale Solar Guide and Utility-Scale Solar Mapping Tool.

**II. BACKGROUND**

**Introduction**

The Department of Development Services recommends the Board of Supervisors approve the *Butte Utility-Scale Solar Guide* (Guide) and provide any further direction to staff. The proposed Guide is a component of the PowerButte initiative and is a resource for anyone interested in learning more about utility-scale solar facilities within unincorporated Butte County, including landowners, developers, community members, County decision-makers and staff. The proposed Guide also provides general

information about solar energy and sets a framework for the consideration of utility-scale solar facilities in Butte County. The project includes a Utility-Scale Solar Mapping Tool that provides a variety of mapping information to assist the user in determining parcel suitability for utility-scale solar facilities. The proposed Guide and related Mapping Tool is the culmination of a multi-year grant-funded process through the Sustainable Communities Planning Grant and Incentives Program, administered by the California Department of Conservation.

### **Sustainable Communities Planning Grant and Incentives Program**

On February 11, 2014 the Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted Resolution No. 14-013 approving an application for grant funds under the Sustainable Communities Planning Grant and Incentives Program (Proposition 84) administered by the Department of Conservation. The grant funds would be used to develop a Renewable Energy Overlay, later revised to the Butte Utility-Scale Solar Guide, in support of the Butte County Climate Action Plan and General Plan. This Grant Application was awarded by Strategic Growth Council on June 3, 2014.

### **Public Outreach**

Over the ensuing months, the Department of Development Services staff, working with PlaceWorks consulting, followed a process for developing this project in accordance with the awarded grant. This included a substantial public outreach effort, the development of the [power.buttecounty.net](http://power.buttecounty.net) website and a variety of other work products. This process was intended to build upon the existing framework for renewable energy development established by the County's General Plan and Climate Action Plan. This began with outreach to local stakeholders, the community, and County decision-makers to engage, educate, and to learn more about the context for and tradeoffs with, large-scale solar energy facilities in Butte County.

As part of this outreach, the County met several times with a group of expert local stakeholders representing a wide variety of interests, and hosted a series of five community workshops held between June 2015 and May 2016, to craft a shared vision for Butte County's future with respect to utility-scale solar facilities, as well as a set of guiding principles, for implementation of that vision. The Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors then reviewed, refined, and accepted the vision statement and guiding principles at meetings held on July 30, and August 25, 2015.

### **Butte Utility-Scale Solar Guide Process**

While this project was originally conceived as a solar overlay zone to streamline the development of utility-scale solar facilities in Butte County, input received during the

process suggested that a case-by-case evaluation of facilities through a conditional use permit is more appropriate, especially given significant concerns about impacts to grazing lands and agricultural resources (refer to Section III. –Agricultural Resources, below). Changes to the current requirement for a conditional use permit under the Zoning Ordinance were no longer considered a necessary part of the project.

The project was subsequently re-conceptualized as the *Butte Utility-Scale Solar Guide*, which compiles the vision, guiding principles, research, mapping, and analysis that had been completed in the project's first phase into a user-friendly document that informs the community, property owners, solar developers, County decision-makers, and staff about the regulatory, technical, siting and design contexts for large-scale solar facilities. The revised project was recommended by the Planning Commission at a public hearing held on November 10, 2016, and directed by the Board of Supervisors at a public hearing held on December 6, 2017.

### **August 10, 2017 Planning Commission Meeting**

The Planning Commission held a public hearing concerning this project on August 10, 2017. The Planning Commission adopted a Resolution recommending that the Board of Supervisors approve the proposed Butte Utility Scale Solar Guide and related Mapping Tool. In their recommendation for approval, the Planning Commission additionally recommended that the Solar Guide be included in Butte County's marketing materials and economic outreach to businesses. No public comment concerning the Guide was received at the Planning Commission hearing.

### **Butte County General Plan and Climate Action Plan Support**

The County's General Plan contains a strong commitment to sustainability, and incorporates those principles into land use decisions. At the same time, the preparation of the County's first Climate Action Plan (CAP), adopted February 25, 2014, has shown that increasing alternative energy production in the County can achieve substantial Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions reductions.

The CAP establishes measures and implementation actions that serve as the County's strategy to reduce GHG emissions. The CAP is an implementation tool of the County General Plan, serving as the County's mitigation strategy to address climate change consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines criteria for a Qualified GHG Reduction Strategy. Reduction targets in the CAP call for a 15% reduction below baseline 2006 GHG emissions levels by 2020 consistent with state guidelines, and a 42% reduction below baseline 2006 levels by 2030, which is the General Plan's horizon year.

The proposed Guide and related Mapping Tool, while not directly responsible for the reduction of GHG in Butte County, play a supportive role in the County's and State's GHG reduction strategies and goals by providing high quality localized information and education regarding the subject of utility-scale solar siting and development.

### **III. ANALYSIS**

Organized as a guide, this document is intended to provide constructive information to support the responsible development of utility-scale solar facilities in Butte County in a manner which is sensitive to local contexts, settings, and the environment. The proposed Guide does not authorize any development or guarantee that any site can ultimately be permitted to develop. All utility-scale solar facilities will continue to be subject to a Conditional Use Permit in accordance with the Butte County Zoning Ordinance.

The overarching Vision Statement developed through public outreach and Board of Supervisors direction for this project states the following:

*Butte County is a place for clean, abundant, and renewable energy supported by technological innovation. Energy generated within the County contributes to economic development, environmental protection, reduced dependence on fossil fuels, and lower greenhouse gas emissions. Locally-produced clean energy also supports an affordable and reliable power network for local residences, businesses, and agricultural operations as well as throughout the state. Utility-scale solar facility development complements the County's scenic qualities, avoids impacts to agricultural resources, and is sited and designed in harmony with Butte County's communities, residential neighborhoods, and cities.*

In accordance with the Vision Statement, Guiding Principles were also developed with extensive community and decision-maker input to ensure the process stayed on track and was developed with strong ties to community needs and desires. The Guiding Principles are provided in their entirety under Chapter 1 of the Guide.

#### **Butte Utility-Scale Solar Guide Organization**

The proposed Guide has been written and organized to address the needs of many types of users, including landowners, developers, staff, decision-makers and the general public. The proposed Guide strives to be clearly organized and efficient in

providing guidance and information to the reader. The proposed Guide is written to enable those with little knowledge about this subject to become more educated, and to provide greater resources for the expert to become more knowledgeable about Butte County's approach to utility-scale solar development, and is organized into the following six chapters:

### **Chapter 1 –Welcome**

This chapter sets the stage for the Guide by introducing the PowerButte initiative and describing the county's physical and economic context with respect to utility-scale solar development. This chapter also includes the vision and guiding principles that serve as a framework for this Guide.

### **Chapter 2 –State and Local Context**

This chapter discusses the current and projected future status of renewable energy statewide and in Butte County and also looks at the current State and local regulations that govern renewable energy facilities.

### **Chapter 3 –Development and Design Guidelines**

This chapter provides guidance on appropriate locations for siting utility-scale solar facilities and guidelines for facility design, development, and decommissioning. The guidelines cover a range of topics and serve as a resource for anyone preparing an application for a utility-scale solar facility. The guidelines do not establish any new requirements or regulations; rather, they suggest ways to develop facilities to minimize impacts and encourage high-quality design.

### **Chapter 4 –Permitting process**

This chapter outlines the County's permitting process for utility-scale solar facilities to guide the public through the application and review process. This includes the necessary steps, recommended application materials, additional requirements, the environmental review process, and general guidance on the permitting process at the State and federal levels.

### **Chapter 5 –Community Benefits**

This chapter provides examples of how other cities and counties have incentivized or required "community benefits" as a part of solar facility development. While community benefits are not currently required or formally incentivized in Butte County, this chapter serves as a resource to help facilitate discussion about potential future changes to address this topic.

## Chapter 6 –Future Trends & Creative Approaches

This chapter provides an overview of the new technologies and concepts that will allow for more widespread and effective solar energy systems, and how these innovations may affect utility-scale solar systems in Butte County.

### Utility-Scale Solar Mapping Tool

An important component to this project and the proposed Guide is the Utility-Scale Solar Mapping Tool. This tool uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to display spatial data. The Mapping Tool was developed to assemble various opportunities and constraints to the development of utility-scale solar development and present them in a web-application that is simple to understand and use.

This tool can be used by landowners, developers, planning staff, and decision-makers to learn more about the County as a whole, and to review specific sites that may be suitable for utility-scale solar development throughout the unincorporated County. The Mapping Tool is discussed in the proposed Guide, and is available for the public's use on the PowerButte website, [power.buttecounty.net](http://power.buttecounty.net). Development Services staff will provide a demonstration of the Mapping Tool at the Board of Supervisors hearing.

### Suitability Model

The suitability model is an important component included in the Mapping Tool, and discussed in the proposed Guide. This “weighted raster” model (i.e. a multi-criteria overlay analysis tool used for site selection and suitability models) takes into account seven “layers” of mapping data that are combined for the user and that display all areas of the County in terms of its suitability for Utility-Scale Solar development. The model also shows areas of the County that are unsuitable for development. The seven layers include:

1. **Unsuitable Areas:** Prime Farmlands, Sensitive Biological Areas, and Residential Zones;
2. **Farmland Categories:** Grazing Lands are weighted as highly constrained.
3. **Constrained Areas:** Wetlands, Oak Woodlands, Migratory Deer Range, Natural Hazards, Land Use Compatibility.
4. **Constrained Buffers:** Areas in proximity to Residential and Scenic Highway General Plan Designations.
5. **Parcel Size:** Parcels greater than 20 acres are considered most feasible.

6. **Opportunity Areas:** Contaminated Sites, Urban Permit Areas, Neal Road Recycling, Energy, and Waste Facility Overlay Zone, Large Rural Parcels.
7. **Opportunity Buffers:** Proximity to transmission lines and substations.

### **Agricultural Resources**

The Butte County Zoning Ordinance divides Agriculture zones into two categories with respect to Utility-Scale Solar permitting, 1) Prime Farmlands, Farmlands of Statewide Importance or Unique Farmlands and, 2) Grazing and Other lands. The Butte County Zoning Ordinance does not allow utility-scale solar facilities on agriculturally zoned lands identified as Prime Farmlands, Farmlands of Statewide Significance, or Unique Farmlands by the State Department of Conservation. Agriculturally zoned lands identified as Grazing Lands or Other Lands may be considered for utility-scale solar facilities through a conditional use permit.

During the public outreach process for this project, ranchers and other agricultural groups voiced concerns regarding the potential for loss of grazing lands in Butte County posed by utility-scale solar facility development. Their view is that the economic benefit of the County's valuable winter grazing lands outweigh the benefits of utility scale solar to ranchers and the County. These groups maintain that utility-scale solar facilities limit rangeland production and groundwater recharge. They do support accessory solar, such as that needed to power a well pump, or an on-site processing facility. Accessory solar differs from utility-scale solar in that accessory solar provides most of the power generated to an on-site agricultural use. Utility-scale solar provides all power directly to the electrical grid, via a local utility, with no power directed to on-site uses.

Situations may nevertheless arise where a property owner with grazing lands may wish to pursue utility-scale solar. The Zoning Ordinance allows consideration on a case-by-case basis under a conditional use permit. In these instances, the proposed Guide encourages that efforts should be made to present the very least amount of impact to existing grazing operations and lands. It is for this reason that Grazing and Other Lands are weighted as highly constrained under the Mapping Tool component of the Guide. This does not alter the ability of any landowner to apply for a conditional use permit. However, it does provide constructive information that will help with the decision making and planning process.

### **CEQA Review**

Because the Butte Utility Scale Solar Guide will not be authorizing any development, no review is required under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

#### **IV. NEXT STEPS**

Upon adoption of the Board of Supervisors Resolution approving the Butte Utility Scale Solar Guide and related Mapping Tool, the Department of Development Services staff will distribute the Guide to relevant stakeholders and agencies, and provide for general availability to the public at the Development Services lobby and online at [power.buttecounty.net](http://power.buttecounty.net).

Questions regarding this process should be directed to Principal Planner Dan Breedon at 538-7629 or Development Services Director Tim Snellings at 538-6821.