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Big solar farms could dominate the future of a Utah hamlet trying to preserve its small-town feel



(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) The town of Fairfield, Wednesday, Oct. 14, 2020.

By Brian Maffly

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With fewer than 150 residents and vast expanses of undeveloped agricultural lands, the quiet hamlet of Fairfield sits on a crossroads of Utah history, occupying space used as a major military installation and an important waypoint on the Pony Express in the 1850s.

Now, long after horseback mail carriers and historic [Camp Floyd](#) have faded away, Fairfield faces another crossroads — this one about its proposed future as a solar energy vortex. Three major projects have been proposed within its boundaries or on its doorstep, raising concerns that the town's rural quality of life could be sacrificed to power Utah County's booming tech center.

[NextEra Energy Resources](#), the nation's largest independent producer of renewable energy, is proposing two 160-megawatt projects, each occupying about 1,300 acres of rangelands owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Peter Lawrence, a former Town Council member who moved to Fairfield 10 years ago with his wife, Sylvia, fears the town is being squeezed between two unsavory choices: accepting the solar projects or risk seeing all that open space transformed into new subdivisions.

"To me," he said, "that's a no-win, no-win."

Most residents want Fairfield to retain its small-town character, he added, so no more than five building permits are issued each year. Yet it's right in the path of [residential development sprawling west out of Eagle Mountain](#). It could only be a matter of time before Fairfield gets swamped.

While the town has a tiny population, its boundaries, set in a 2004 incorporation, span 25 square miles south of Cove Fort. It occupies a part of Cedar Valley crisscrossed with wildlife migration routes and provides important habitat for birds and big game.

NextEra hopes to sell the power to Rocky Mountain Power, which plans to add [7,000 megawatts of generating capacity](#) from wind and the sun by 2023. Together, the two Fairfield projects would equal the total amount of [rooftop solar currently installed](#) in the utility's service area; and they are just the start of what's expected to be a coming wave of utility-scale solar projects. Five to eight acres is needed for each megawatt of solar.



(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Heidi Brunner talks about the plans for the solar farm near her home in Fairfield, Wednesday, Oct. 14, 2020.

Fairfield's third project, known as Quicksilver Solar, has been proposed by Sandy-based [Enyo Renewable Energy](#). Just 200 acres would be within Fairfield and the rest in Eagle Mountain and unincorporated Utah County.

Projects proposed in Fairfield cover rangeland east of town, the part facing Eagle Mountain.

"By and large, that land is not productive," resident Ronnie Wilson said at a recent town meeting. "I would rather look at a solar farm than I would subdivisions. The church could conceivably sell that. A solar farm might be a better neighbor than subdivisions."

Farmland Reserve Inc., the church's for-profit agricultural enterprise, seasonally grazes livestock on the land, which is zoned for agriculture and low-density residential development. The solar projects would require a change in zoning or a variance to allow a nonconforming use, according to Mayor Brad Gurney.

"There is some anxiety. It is a big project for our town," Gurney said. "It's a mixed bag right now until we get some more information from them."

NextEra and church officials presented the proposed solar farms at an Aug. 19 meeting, where they were met with tough questions from skeptical residents.

Farmland Reserve has been looking at some of its agricultural holdings, both inside and outside of Utah, to identify marginally productive lands that may be better suited to support solar arrays than livestock, according to G. Wesley Quinton, the company's director of land and government affairs. Some of its Fairfield holdings fit that bill.

"We try to get the highest and best use of the property," he said at the August meeting. "We will continue to produce agriculture, but there are locations that are prime for solar, and we want to participate in that. The church has an interest in energy, particularly clean energy."

The church also owns 26,000 acres not far to the south in Goshen Valley, where it is also considering leases to solar developers, Quinton said.

Three other major projects have already been proposed in that area on more than 10,000 acres of private land not owned by the church, according to documents on file with the Utah County Board of Adjustment.

[Clenera](#), a Boise-based solar developer doing business in Utah as Parasol Renewable Energy, is behind the two largest. The Faraday-Goshen Valley solar farm would cover 5,500 acres west of Utah Lake, and Maxwell Solar would cover another 2,800 acres. And [Strata Solar](#) is seeking to develop the proposed Project Eagle on 1,760 acres.

The Fairfield projects would be developed in separate phases, each coming with enough lithium-

ion batteries to store half the farm's electrical generation for a few hours. The goal would be to match the project's peak power generation at midday with peak demand in late afternoon, according to Stefan Eckman and Ryan Fitzpatrick, NextEra project managers who spoke at the meeting.

The company would lease the land from the church for the 30-year life of the projects.



(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) The cemetery in Fairfield, Wednesday, Oct. 14, 2020.

Solar panels would be mounted on motorized tracks to face the sun during the day and would be at least a mile away from any existing homes. The first project would create 350 construction jobs and five permanent operations positions.

"Studies indicate no impact on property values on residences nearby," Eckman said.

Residents' questions, though, reflected serious doubts about the project's impacts.

"What a joke. Do you expect people to believe that?" retorted resident Jaren Hancock. "Take that out of your dialogue, tap dancing around what you think you would bring to this town, which is absolutely nothing. Thank God you haven't brought up the subject of royalties. Money doesn't mean anything to us. Your argument is lame."

The Lawrences said proponents are asking town residents to accept a massive “eyesore” in their midst, while providing little in return.

“This is not a good place for a solar farm. There are lots of other places that aren’t that close to a small town that doesn’t want to be encroached upon,” Sylvia Lawrence said. “You’ll find it is not going to be accepted very nicely.”

Open public land abounds in Utah’s largely uninhabited and sun-drenched West Desert. While the Bureau of Land Management has designated many parts “solar enterprise zones,” developers have been loath to pursue projects on these public lands out of fear that federal red tape would render them uncompetitive. As a result, proponents have looked to private and state trust lands to site potential solar installations.

That sometimes means locating them near towns like Bluff and Fairfield, where residents aren’t thrilled about seeing their pastoral views cluttered up.

In an interview, NextEra’s Fitzpatrick said his firm chose to work in Fairfield because there is a landowner eager to host solar farms, growing demand nearby for electrical power and proximity to existing transmission.

“That’s going to be a prime location,” he said, vowing to be sensitive to Fairfield’s interests.

“We like to engage the community, really get an understanding of their thoughts, their needs, their concerns about a project,” Fitzpatrick said, “so that we can use that feedback in our development of our sites.”

At the recent meeting, one Fairfield Town Council member said he was stunned at how little revenue Fairfield would see from the project. Most of the property tax generated by the projects would go to the Alpine School District, and the town would be obligated to bear the project’s impacts while most of the revenue generated would flow elsewhere.

“Those job creations aren’t going to benefit us because we don’t have restaurants or gas stations,” the council member said. “We have a volunteer fire department. They aren’t trained to put battery fires out. There has to be something more helpful to the town other than just renewable energy that helps everybody but us. ... We are tiny municipality that enjoys its open space.”

NextEra officials acknowledged the town will not see a tax bonanza, but they pledged the company, which already has renewable energy projects in 36 other states, will work with the community to identify needs it can underwrite.

“We want to be part of the community. We are one of the few renewable energy companies that develop and operate our plants,” Fitzpatrick said. “We come in, do the right thing and treat people with respect because we are going to be part of the community for a really long time.”