

MINUTES
CITY OF DEKALB
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION
January 6, 2025

The Planning and Zoning Commission held a meeting on January 6, 2025, in the Yusunas Meeting Room at the DeKalb Public Library, 309 Oak Street, DeKalb, Illinois. Vice Chair McMahon called the meeting to order at 6:08 PM.

A. ROLL CALL

Recording Secretary, Olivia Doss, called the roll. Planning and Zoning Commission members present were: Vice Chair Bill McMahon, Steve Becker, Trixy O'Flaherty, and Maria Pena-Graham. Commission Chair Max Maxwell and Commission member Jerry Wright were absent. Planning Director Dan Olson and Assistant City Manager Bob Redel were present representing the City.

B. APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA (Additions/Deletions)

Vice Chair McMahon requested a motion to approve the January 6, 2025, agenda as presented. Ms. O'Flaherty motioned to approve the agenda as presented. Ms. Pena-Graham seconded the motion, and the motion was approved by unanimous voice vote.

C. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

1. December 16, 2024 – Vice Chair McMahon requested a motion to approve the December 16, 2024, minutes as presented. Mr. Becker motioned to approve the minutes as submitted. Ms. O'Flaherty seconded the motion, and the motion was approved by unanimous voice vote.

D. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Open Floor to Anyone Wishing to Speak on Record)

None.

E. NEW BUSINESS

1. **Concept Plan** – A request by Donato Solar for review of a Concept Plan for construction of a 4-megawatt ground mounted solar energy system (solar field) and a boutique data center on approximately 30 acres along the west side of Peace Road between Greenwood Acres Dr. and Challenger Dr.

Nick Mahoney presented on behalf of Donato Solar. Mr. Mahoney gave a brief overview of the Concept Plan, describing the 30-acre parcel, the solar array, and the additional items being put on the site including two data center buildings and a battery system. He stated the solar panels will face due south along Peace Road, with a vegetative area added under the arrays. The battery system areas will sit adjacent to the solar panels, and each area will be approximately 200ft x 60ft. Mr. Mahoney explained the battery system will capture the excess energy created on sunny days that would not regularly be put into the grid. The two data center buildings will be located in the southwest corner of the lot with each building being approximately 100 ft x 60 ft. and 20 ft. tall.

Mr. Mahoney went on to explain how their business model functions. Donato Solar develops the solar energy systems and batter systems and leases the data centers to tenants. They currently have

approximately 50 megawatts in solar systems throughout Illinois and are headquartered in Champaign. He noted this is their northern most project in Illinois.

He added although the data center will contain two buildings, there will be very little foot traffic as they are monitored remotely. The main foot traffic will come from routine maintenance checks. He also added there will be a bathroom in the data center buildings, and the site will connect to City water lines.

Mr. Mahoney explained the battery system installation is a newer aspect of their solar field sites. One of the main benefits of adding the battery system is the reduction in wasted energy. Any extra energy created gets stored in the battery system and put back into the grid, typically being utilized within 24 hours. Mr. Mahoney added this creates virtually zero wasted energy. He reiterated Donato is in the very early stages of their Concept Plan, and they are willing to work with the City to meet any requirements. He confirmed Donato understands they will need to petition for annexation into the City, and have the site rezoned to Industrial.

Planning Director, Dan Olson, gave his Staff Report dated January 2, 2025. He stated the applicant has provided a summary of the project and directed the Commission to their background material. He said Donato's summary indicates in addition to the solar array system, infrastructure on-site will include a data center to host a variety of services. The solar array and data center combination will provide a direct offset to utility costs, particularly during peak energy consumption periods when grid rates are typically higher. Mr. Olson mentioned this results in a reduction of both operational expenses and the environmental impact of the data center's energy consumption.

Mr. Olson explained access to the two data center buildings will be off Challenger Dr. Water and sanitary sewer will be extended to the data center buildings. He said both the City and KWRD have provided direction regarding utility connections. An analysis of the stormwater runoff from the buildings and parking will need to be evaluated. The UDO requires a 50-foot setback for any aspect of the solar field, except fences and transmission lines. Mr. Olson mentioned the plan indicates a 50-foot buffer being maintained around the perimeter of the site meeting the minimum requirements. He stated there is a 100-foot setback to residential areas, which will be met. Since the site is along a major roadway, additional landscape screening next to Peace Road would be encouraged. Mr. Olson pointed out an error in the original summary which stated a waiver request may be necessary for the solar array's height. He clarified Donato Solar's original summary had an incorrect height of up to 20 feet, noting the arrays will be 8-9 feet high.

Mr. Olson stated if Donato Solar chooses to proceed with the project, they will be requesting annexation and rezoning to the "PD-I", Planned Development Industrial District to accommodate the uses. A preliminary/final development plan would also need to be submitted. He mentioned a public hearing would be required in front of the Commission who would forward a recommendation to the City Council for final action. Mr. Olson noted this will be similar to the solar farms approved on Route 38, Gurler Road, and on Pleasant Street near the airport.

Mr. Olson noted to the Planning and Zoning Commission the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) allows for review by the Commission of a Concept Plan. The purpose of the Concept Plan review is to allow the applicant to present and explain the proposed project and let the Commission and nearby property owners provide comments.

Although not a public hearing, Vice Chair McMahon awarded audience members the opportunity to speak.

Eric Kristoff, 1496 Cambria Drive, Unit 5, inquired about the workload of the data centers and who the tenant may be. Mr. Kristoff expressed concerns about the noise level and water consumption generated by the data centers for cooling. He also inquired about additional trees or foliage added on the residential side (west side) of the site. Mr. Mahoney responded the data centers will not be water cooled, which will eliminate the draw on the water supply. He also clarified these data centers are different than the large data center in the City (Meta). These data centers are small, modular buildings that are air cooled. He also explained Donato Solar does not handle the data center aspect of the site, as they lease the buildings to tenants. However, he added additional vegetation will be added along Peace Road and along the residential lot line. Further, Mr. Mahoney noted they have done noise analysis for their other sites, and they typically find automobile noise from a busy road, such as Peace Road, is often louder than the noise of the solar field or data center. Mr. Olson also pointed out the extensive tree line already present along the residential lot line to the west and encouraged additional vegetation along Peace Road.

Elizabeth-Johnson Quiney, 1504 Cambria Drive, Unit 6, inquired about the type of battery and fire suppression they will use. Mr. Mahoney explained the batteries will be LFP batteries (lithium-ion phosphate) which is the leading batteries in this category due to their stability and high energy density. All batteries used will meet the standards set forth in the International Fire Code. Mr. Mahoney added the LFP batteries will be self-contained, greatly reducing the fire risk. Additionally, Donato has an extensive operations and maintenance routine, including a 10-year manufacturer warranty on the batteries. Regarding fire suppression, he was not certain Donato had made a decision on the exact type of fire suppression that will be used, but he assumed water-based suppression, or sprinklers, would be used. Mr. Mahoney noted the fire risk is low with solar fields. Mr. Olson added the City has recently adopted the latest International Fire and Building Codes, and if the site was annexed, they would have to meet the City's requirements.

Dawn Gavin, 1480 Cambria Drive, Unit 6, inquired about the length of time for a project of this nature. She added they are having a rodent infestation issue for the first time in the four (4) years they have resided here and noticed it after the clearing of the fields during late summer. She questioned if this would continue to happen once the solar field was installed. Mr. Mahoney stated the construction timeline is fairly quick for solar fields, especially since the site is already agricultural. If all goes according to plan, the site would be functional in approximately six (6) to nine (9) months. He explained Donato Solar partners with Pheasants Forever, who have created a seed mixture that only grows approximately 12-18 inches tall. He noted this eliminates the need for mowing, as the grass grows lower than the panels. Additional benefits to this are less soil turnover and less wildlife disturbance. Additional discussion continued between Ms. Gavin and Mr. Mahoney about a different Donato Solar site. She also thanked Mr. Mahoney for the protection of local wildlife.

Discussion then turned to the Commission.

Ms. O'Flaherty inquired about a decommissioning plan. Mr. Mahoney confirmed a decommissioning plan would be submitted with the Final Plans once they move forward. Mr. Olson confirmed a decommissioning plan is required by the UDO.

Vice Chair McMahon asked about the need for the waiver regarding the solar array height. Mr. Mahoney reiterated the maximum height of the solar array panels will be approximately 9 ft at a 12% grade, and the data center buildings will be a maximum of 20 ft tall. Mr. McMahon questioned the need for the waiver, to which Mr. Olson clarified there was an error in the original summary and no waiver will be needed.

Mr. McMahon also inquired about the layout of the site including the battery storage areas. Mr. Mahoney stated the batteries are shipped in and the batteries are dropped into the site. Mr. McMahon asked about the size of the batteries, and Mr. Mahoney noted he was not sure of the exact measurements, but knew they were no taller than 9 feet. Additional discussion ensued between Mr. McMahon and Mr. Mahoney regarding the visibility of the site from Peace Road and Greenwood Acres Dr, and the inconsistent measurements included on the Concept Plan. Mr. Mahoney confirmed the Final Plan will include exact and specific measurements. Discussion continued regarding the traffic in and out of the site. Mr. Mahoney stated the traffic will come mostly from maintenance workers and will be manned remotely the majority of the time.

Mr. Becker commented additional vegetation along the residential lot line would be encouraged to help maintain an aesthetically pleasing view for the residents. Mr. Mahoney agreed, and asked Mr. Olson about the location of the vegetation. Mr. Olson confirmed it could be placed inside the 50 ft. setback line. Mr. Becker asked about the impact solar energy has on vegetation. Mr. Mahoney stated he has only seen positive effects.

Given this was not a public hearing, no roll call vote was taken. The Commission was in general agreement the project should move forward. Mr. Olson noted in the event Donato Solar intends to proceed, a formal public hearing will be held at that time and property owners within 250 feet of the site would be notified.

F. REPORTS

Mr. Olson stated the next meeting will have one (1) public hearing for a special use permit for auto sales at 2050 E. Lincoln Hwy.

G. ADJOURNMENT

Vice Chair McMahon requested a motion to Adjourn. Mr. Becker motioned to adjourn, and Ms. Pena-Graham seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 6:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Olivia K. Doss, Recording Secretary

Minutes approved by the Planning and Zoning Commission on January 21, 2025.

Click [here](#) to view the agenda packet for the January 6, 2025 Planning and Zoning Commission Meeting.

Click [here](#) to view the video recording of the January 6, 2025, Planning and Zoning Commission Meeting.