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**Town Council approves Lightsource bp solar farm proposal**

MERRILLVILLE — A new solar farm project could help bring a brighter future to Merrillville.

Lightsource bp is planning to create a multi-million-dollar solar farm on two parcels of property which are located on Colorado Street and Clay Street on the south side of Merrillville.

The solar farm will produce clean and renewable energy, and it's expected to generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in annual property tax revenue. It could also create dozens of construction jobs.

The Merrillville Town Council on Tuesday approved a variance of use allowing the solar panel operation on the two industrial-zoned parcels.

"This is an exciting project that will not only help the environment, but it also will bring a variety of economic benefits to the Town of Merrillville," Town Council President Rick Bella said.

Town Councilman Shawn Pettit said initial plans for the project included a third parcel near 97th Avenue and Grand Boulevard, but residents in Merrillville's panhandle area opposed the construction of solar panels on that 160-acre site, which has a residential zoning classification.

"I solely supported all my constituents on that," Pettit said.

Lightsource bp later withdrew the 160-acre site from the development plan.

Resident Sam Shelhart thanked the council and Merrillville's Board of Zoning Appeals for their efforts to keep the rural atmosphere in the panhandle area.

"There are not many areas left in Merrillville like it is in the panhandle, and it has and always will be the intentions of its residents to keep it in its natural environment for as long as possible," Shelhart said.

Before the 160-acre site was removed from the plans, it was estimated the development would involve a \$100 million investment, and it would generate about \$1 million in annual property taxes.

Attorney Richard Anderson, who is representing Lightsource bp, said those figures will be less because the 160-acre site is no longer involved, but they will still be significant.

"It will be substantial, obviously, you can tell that," Anderson said. "There's still more than 300 acres" included in the development.

Merrillville Planning and Building Director Sheila Shine said Lightsource bp uses a "Responsible Solar" approach in its solar projects throughout the country.

"Which means they work hard to make it a positive for the community," Shine said.

In addition to the environmental and economic benefits, the development will include a long-term land management and biodiversity plan.

That plan can help create a pollinator habitat. The solar farm will also have natural undergrowth below the solar panels to help manage stormwater runoff and drainage.

Shine said the development also calls for a buffer zone around the perimeter of the parcels. Those buffer zones will feature a berm with trees, shrubbery, and an agricultural-style fence. Besides screening the project area, the trees and shrubbery will provide additional habitat for local wildlife.

Anderson also indicated the solar farm will be quiet.

"A lot less traffic than another industrial user...so it's good for the traffic flow, too," he said.

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