

# Mt. SAC approves mega solar power plant after adding concessions



By Steve Scauzillo

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WALNUT >> After agreeing to move solar panels farther away from homes, the Mount San Antonio College board approved the construction of a massive solar-power project on a residential hillside across the street from the community college.

The concession — made after numerous residents expressed concerns about blocked views and ugly sight lines — will diminish the impact the ground-level solar panels will have on nearby homes, said Mount SAC Vice President Michael Gregoryk, during a special board meeting Wednesday night.

“Once we moved the solar field down, it went from 75 feet away (from homes) to 300 feet away,” he said.

The softening of the alignment convinced the board to vote 6-0 to begin the design and construction of the solar power project this fall with considerable grading of the hillside just south of Temple Avenue/Amar Road and Grand Avenue, followed by installation of ground-level panels in the spring.

Trustees Laura Santos, Robert Hildalgo, Judy Chen Haggerty, David Hall, Manuel Baca and Fred Chyr voted in favor. Trustee Rosanne Bader was absent.

While Mount SAC Chief Executive Officer and President Bill Scroggins was given the OK to sign the deal with Borrego Solar Systems and vowed to move forward, the project still faces environmental and legal hurdles.

First, [United Walnut Taxpayers, which successfully stopped a Mount SAC parking garage project](#) overlooking the Timberline neighborhood, has asked a Los Angeles Superior Court judge to block the solar plant on grounds the college is violating state environmental laws.

The group asked the college to instead install solar panels on existing campus buildings or above carports within the 420-acre campus. A model is the Metrolink Station solar carports on Brea Canyon Road. But the board rejected the idea and added the Environmental Impact Report did not consider any other alternative but the 11-acre hillside installation.

“I have never seen an EIR not look at alternatives,” questioned Dennis Majors, a Walnut resident who helped build the Diamond Valley Reservoir for the Metropolitan Water District. “You must look at alternatives.”

Walnut City Manager Rob Wishner said the omission of alternatives in the college’s EIR was troublesome. “We will be looking closely at the environmental aspect. We believe it must include alternatives,” said Wishner, who attended the meeting but did not address the board.

Another sticking point is whether the \$7 million project needs to be reviewed by Walnut City Hall. Board president David Hall said after the meeting no city review is required because of an exemption from local zoning rules in Proposition 39, a ballot measure passed by voters in 2012 to bring about clean energy projects and reduce the state’s carbon footprint.

The city also has sued the college primarily over the proposed parking garage but also involving the Master Plan EIR for other projects and zoning issues. The judge granted an injunction, stopping the garage project. But the case is pending.

Wishner said the solar project will have more of a permanent impact on Walnut than a parking garage.

“It is right in the heart of the community. It will impact the natural hillside and it can be viewed from many vantage points,” he said.

Hall said the college has owned that property since 1946 and chose to develop it only recently with a solar project, something that won’t bring traffic or crime. He was frustrated by Walnut residents’ opposition, saying the college was there first.

“I don’t think the citizens of Walnut want anything out there, ever,” he told the audience. “But having no use on that land is unacceptable to me. And you will just have to accept that.”

When asked if the board considered the cost of legal fees as part of its decision, Hall said the project was worth it, even though the college will have to defend it in court.

Santos dismissed the group’s concerns about the parking garage suppressing property values, saying the Timberline residents have no bona fide argument. “It’s not like it is a halfway house or a marijuana dispensary,” she said after the meeting. She believed the residents would still rise up in opposition to any kind of solar project, even if Mount SAC went with the carport option.

The [2.2-megawatt solar project](#) costs approximately \$7 million and will eventually shave the college’s electric power bill by about \$400,000 a year, Scroggins said. He argued the savings is enough to educate 100 students per year.