

# Tsakopoulos eyes South Davis area farms for solar project



Sacramento developer Angelo Tsakopoulos wants to build a 700-acre solar field on prime farmland between South Davis and the Yolo Bypass.

[Tsakopoulos](#) is pushing to build an 80-megawatt solar farm over 688 acres on three pieces of land that he owns, which total 1,316 acres. The land lies 1 mile due east of South Davis. Under Tsakopoulos' plan, solar panels would run to the Yolo Bypass levee, which would separate them from the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area.

Tsakopoulos could not be reached for comment Wednesday, but he submitted [an application](#) last week to the Yolo County Planning and Public Works Department.

The panels could harness enough electricity to power 25,000 homes, according to [a description of the project](#) submitted to the planning department.

Since the land is slated for farming, the developer will have to win approval from the Board of Supervisors, which would consider the project after staff analysis and a recommendation from the Planning Commission. However, officials are already voicing worry about ripping farmland out of production.

“That’s prime ag land. It’s in the heart of some pretty good tomato production,” said county Agriculture Commissioner John Young. “These industrial facilities have no place on prime farmland. It’s no different than trying to put in some kind of industrial plant.”

Not exactly, said Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis. Building solar panels over prime farmland is a tough issue, because it forces the county to choose between two things it values: fostering its No.1 industry, agriculture, and pursuing alternative energy.

However, covering 700 acres of some of the best farmland in the world with solar panels may not be the best way to marry those two goals. What about rockier, less desirable soil? Or pursuing a different alternative energy altogether?

“If you look at giving up some prime farmland, you have to look at what we’re going to give it up for,” Provenza said. “Are we doing it for a business that has a large number of jobs?”

Operating and maintaining the solar farm would create three jobs, according to Tsakopoulos’ application.

Tsakopoulos pitched the project as consistent with grazing cattle, Provenza said. He’s not sure that’s true, but even if it is, grazing is not the “optimal use” of prime farmland. “It’s so much more economically viable to grow tomatoes or other crops,” the supervisor said.

Provenza said he’s keeping an open mind until he gets the details, but he knows “it’s going to be controversial. It will be very closely scrutinized.”

The project could run afoul of a draft law currently working through the county’s planning pipeline. Staff is crafting the ordinance as a way to manage the number of solar panels that “has accelerated greatly over the last couple years,” said David Morrison, assistant director of planning and public works.

If passed by the board as is, the law would restrict all solar projects, from small residential undertakings to industrial-size solar arrays like Tsakopoulos’. It would lay out rules for where the panels would have to stop relative to other properties, how a developer would have to make up for destroying farmland or wildlife habitat, and for justifying why a solar project had to eat up prime farmland instead of something less arable.

Current solar panels last 20 to 25 years, which means a temporary loss of farmland. But solar technology is still pretty new, Morrison added. If the technology accelerates, the panels could keep that land fallow forever.

“We’re losing ag land” just like if someone were to pave it over for a housing tract or turn it into wetlands, Morrison added. “Yolo County has always placed a very high priority on minimizing the loss of ag land wherever possible.”

The ordinance is set to go before the Planning Commission for a fourth time at its April 14 meeting. Then it heads to the board.

If ag commissioner Young had a vote, he probably could cast it now.

“This is about profit,” he told The Enterprise. “What I’m finding here is when the dollar’s driving the decision, the profits really outweigh our principles, and our principles in Yolo County (are) maintaining farmland.”

“Industrial solar facilities don’t do that.”

— Reach Jonathan Edwards at [jedwards@davisenterprise.net](mailto:jedwards@davisenterprise.net) or (530) 747-8052.

