

RODE PARISH COUNCIL – PROPOSED SOLAR FARM AT RODE COMMENTS TO PLANNING COMMITTEE MEETING 11TH JULY 2024

Planning Application 2023/2183/FUL

My name is Mike Salmon. I am the Chair of Rode Parish Council. The Parish Council strongly supports the provision of sustainable energy, and we would very much like to support this application. However, despite a number of changes, this application continues to have a large number of fundamental flaws.

At its meeting on 7th May the Planning Committee raised three critical concerns about the proposed development:

Firstly – Scale, in terms of quantum. The applicant has not addressed this issue - the changes made to the proposed development are immaterial in terms of quantum – in fact, the land area of the solar farm appears to be *slightly larger* in this latest submission to Somerset Council.

Secondly - Scale in terms of impact on landscape and heritage assets. The applicant has made a small change which will have some positive impact on the setting of one property....however, this will make no difference whatsoever to the solar farm’s impact on the landscape generally. And whilst hedge planting will no doubt eventually (when mature) help to screen the solar farm during summer, the additional planting (like all the applicant’s proposed planting) is deciduous, and will provide little in the way of screening for more than half the year. Whilst the Conservation Officer has accepted that the proposed changes result in a lesser impact to the significance of the surrounding heritage assets, the substance of their previous objections have been almost completely ignored.

Thirdly – Access. The Planning Committee expressed concern about the use of Monkley Lane to access the development. This concern was not limited to the construction period, although the applicant has chosen to address only this issue. In particular, the applicant has not addressed the issues regarding emergency vehicle access which are set out in Rode PC’s original objection. Monkley Lane does not meet the requirements set out in the guidance produced by the National Fire Chiefs Council, principally due to its narrow width, but also in a number of other respects. It is also important to highlight that the landowner concerned does not appear supportive of the proposed access route.

In summary, the changes made to the scheme are extremely minor and only partially address the concerns raised by the Committee.

Further, since the May Committee Meeting the Government issued a Written Ministerial Statement chiefly highlighting concerns relating to Food Security. This is directly relevant to this planning application which involves the use of significant areas of fertile farmland (including parts categorised as “Best and Most Versatile”, which is protected under planning law).

Rode Parish Council is extremely disappointed that the applicant has chosen not to engage with the local community in a bid to arrive at a development of appropriate scale for the location.

We believe that an alternative scheme can relatively simply be developed which achieves the following:

- A development of significant scale, but appropriately sized for its location and proximity to the village, with minimal negative impact on the landscape and heritage assets;

- A development which excludes the use of any high quality agricultural land;
- A development with a permanent access route, supported by local residents and landowners, which meets the requirements of Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue;
- A development which still provides a meaningful contribution to carbon reduction.

We strongly urge the Planning Committee to reject (or further defer) the application, to allow time for the applicant to fully engage with the local community and develop a scheme which can be supported by all. Whilst this may take a little more time, the current scheme – with its obvious drawbacks – would be in situ for 40 years. A few more months to arrive at a much improved scheme is a small price to pay in that context.