

The Richland Township Zoning Hearing Board met November 18, 2025, at 6:30 p.m. to hear the Appeal or Application of the Applicant, Mitch Crowley of Pacifico Energy, for property owned by 1st Summit Bank, located at 590 Oakridge Drive, Richland Township, Cambria County, Pennsylvania which is zoned C-2 General Commercial District. The applicant requested a use variance and/or a special exception to construct a ground mounted solar PV system to be connected to First Energy and Penelec utilities as provided in Richland Township Zoning Ordinance Section 240-100. The applicant also requested a building area coverage variance from Richland Township Zoning Ordinance Section 240-63B.

Present:	Absent:
Bill Patrick, Chairman	Mark Rychak
Pat Wess, Vice-Chairman	
Rodney Kniss	
PJ McGowan	
David Strushensky	
Eric D. Hochfeld, Solicitor	
Tiffany Shomo, Secretary	

Mr. Patrick began the hearing at 6:30 pm with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mr. Hochfeld listed exhibits. Board Exhibit #1 was the appeal application with attachments. Board Exhibit #2 was the Richland Township Zoning Ordinance, by reference, and Board Exhibit #3 was the posting of the municipal building, the property involved, advertising in the Tribune-Democrat and notification of this hearing to adjoining property owners via certified mail.

Court stenographer Lori Behe swore in the following:

1. Randy Cortese
2. Dan Smith
3. Kelly Ruiz
4. Sharon Honkus

Mr. Randy Cortese appeared to represent the applicant, Pacifico, in connection with a proposed solar field development. He explained that the project would occupy approximately 8.4 acres of an 11.75-acre area. Should approval be granted, the two existing parcels would need to be merged. This hearing represented Phase 1 of securing the required variance and/or special exception. Mr. Cortese described the project location, noting that along Oakridge Drive the land has remained vacant for a long period, and that the adjoining 10 acres belong to the Cambria County Humane Society. The property currently consists of small, wooded areas with smaller trees, with larger trees toward the Humane Society side. A 50-foot setback is planned on all sides

of the property. Relative to Mr. Smith's property, the development would be centered in the smaller two-acre parcel and approximately 75 feet from the property line to the proposed fence.

Mr. Cortese stated that the entire solar installation would be fenced, and the solar panels would be similar in appearance, height, and size to those at the Votech site, generally around 5'×8' or 4'×6'. A travel lane would run between the rows of panels. The plan proposes a single access gate and an internal access road dividing the two solar sectors. Visits to the site would be minimal. While the preliminary layout includes fencing with a 50-foot offset from all property lines—and 86 feet from the Humane Society's property line. The full site plan has not yet been completed. If approvals are granted, a more detailed plan would be prepared for the Planning Commission. Mr. Cortese acknowledged he personally does not favor the appearance of solar panels and had suggested arbor vitae as screening, though that option may not be feasible. He described the noise generated by the field as a very low hum.

The panels are expected to have a 30-year life span and are approximately 95% recyclable. Mr. Cortese, who assisted in drafting a similar ordinance for Adams Township, noted that the primary concern there was fire risk because solar panel fires cannot be extinguished with water and most fire departments do not have sufficient foam. He also remarked that the airport raised no concerns about panel reflectivity when consulted on a separate project in Adams Township, although he was unsure whether the airport had been contacted regarding this specific proposal. The electricity generated would be supplied directly to the FirstEnergy grid, with no on-site storage; transformers would be located just outside the main gate.

Mr. Cortese described the property as lightly wooded with small pines and a slightly sloping grade from Oakridge Drive, but not a forest. The total area includes parcels of 9.66 acres and 2.03 acres, which would be merged. The parcel is zoned C-2, as are the surrounding properties.

Kelly Ruiz, Executive Director of the Cambria County Humane Society, asked whether pesticides would be used for vegetation control. Mr. Cortese stated that no pesticides are planned and that grass would be maintained by mowing. He noted there would be no glare affecting the animals and that all stormwater management would occur on-site. While animal hearing is more sensitive than human hearing, he explained that the sound generated by solar fields is very low. The solar installation would be set back approximately 90 feet from the Humane Society property line, and the Humane Society must also maintain its own setbacks.

Sharon Honkus, a Humane Society board member, reiterated concerns about the use of herbicides and pesticides. Mr. Cortese again stated that vegetation management would rely primarily on mowing and conventional landscaping methods, with gravel lanes between panel rows and grass across most of the site. He did not want to state that herbicides would "never" be used but emphasized that the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has regulations for stormwater management for solar facilities, including requirements for grass between panels, which Pacifico plans to implement. He added that in his experience with five solar projects, pesticides have not been used, with some sites even employing goats, chickens, or mowers for maintenance. Mr. McGowan added that DEP prohibits the use of non-approved substances, and limited growth under the panels is expected due to shading.

With no further testimony from the audience or comments from the township, the board recessed from 6:56 p.m. to 7:24 p.m.

Mr. Cortese clarified the panel dimensions as 7'6" x 3'9".

Mr. Wess made a motion to continue December 17, 2025 at 6:00 pm so the board can hear technical testimony from the representative(s) of the applicant which would include, but not limited to, enlarged drawings numbered A-01, A-02 and the adjoining land merger/subdivision plan. The motion was seconded by Mr. McGowan.

Respectfully submitted,

T.Shomo

Tiffany Shomo

Secretary