

The Richland Township Zoning Hearing Board met December 17, 2025, at 6:00 p.m. for a continuation 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 is also requesting a building area coverage variance from Richland Township Zoning Ordinance Section 240-63B. This hearing was conducted in the Richland Township meeting room, 322 Schoolhouse Road, Johnstown, PA 15904.

Present:

Bill Patrick

Pat Wess

Rodney Kniss

PJ McGowan

Eric D. Hochfeld, solicitor

Tiffany Shomo, secretary

Mr. Patrick began the hearing at 6:00 pm with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mr. Hochfeld listed exhibits. Board Exhibit #4 is the notice published in the Tribune Democrat.

Court stenographer Lewis Hernandez swore in the following:

1. Robert Mitchell Crowley
2. Tung N'Vietson

Mr. Hochfeld confirmed Mr. Crowley was requesting a variance or special exception to erect solar farm in C2 district. Mr. Hochfeld explained that there is a provision under C2 (240-62A(62)) for similar uses authorized by the Zoning Hearing Board. He explained the request would also be considered under that specific ordinance.

Mr. Crowley explained that Pennsylvania allows net metering projects, which let solar facilities feed power directly into the grid without increasing costs to ratepayers. He stated that this business model allows developers to sell power at the same rate utilities pay and benefits both the developer and the community. After learning this, they began looking for properties and identified First Summit as a willing seller. The project would connect to a FirstEnergy distribution line along the road through an easement, cross the road, and inject three-phase power into the system through a switchgear. The solar system would be a fixed-tilt design and would meet all required setbacks.

Mr. Crowley stated that some trees would be removed, but vegetation would be allowed to grow underneath the panels and could be managed through mowing or grazing animals if permitted.

The panels would be supported by metal I-beams driven about eight feet into the ground and galvanized to prevent rust. An NPDES permit would be obtained for stormwater management, though he noted there would be little impact since snow sheds from the panels and vegetation absorbs runoff.

The site would have one access point from the road and would be fully fenced for security. A roadway would run through the middle of the site for maintenance and emergency access, and the local fire department would be consulted before construction. Mr. Crowley stated the system is designed to operate for at least 25 years, and once it reaches the end of its life, the equipment would be removed and the land sold.

Mr. Crowley explained that the panels are connected in series and feed into inverters that convert the power to three-phase electricity. Inverters typically last 10 to 15 years and would be replaced as needed. He said inverter replacement is the main maintenance requirement. The panels would face south at about a 20-degree tilt and cover roughly 50 percent of the property. The land would be cleared and reseeded after installation.

From Oakridge Drive, drivers would mainly see the backs of the panels and the metal framework. A fence would surround the site, and additional screening such as fence slats or evergreen trees could be added if required. The panels would be about five to six feet tall, allowing someone to walk underneath them. Mr. Crowley said visibility from the road would be limited and that additional screening up to eight feet tall could be installed if needed.

Mr. Crowley stated the facility would produce very little noise, mostly from the inverters, which sound similar to a transmission line. The panels themselves make no noise. The switchgear would be mounted on a concrete pad about 8 by 10 feet and would be roughly six to seven feet tall. It would be permanently installed and used only for electrical equipment.

He explained that suitable sites are limited because the project must connect to a three-phase line and interconnection costs can make projects unfeasible. This was the only site in Cambria County that met those requirements. Mr. N'Vietson noted that a neighboring parcel was also considered, but Mr. Cortese clarified that it has since been purchased by the Humane Society. Mr. Crowley added that Pennsylvania encourages placing these projects on commercial land to protect farmland and that having a willing seller was key.

Mr. Crowley stated the company intends to own the property, so no decommissioning agreement is currently in place, though some municipalities require a bond. He said early abandonment is unlikely because the panels have 25-year warranties, inverters have 10-year warranties, and the steel has resale value. He also stated the panels are not toxic, as they are made of silicon, aluminum, and glass.

Mr. Crowley said this would be the company's first project in Pennsylvania, but they have installed solar facilities near industrial sites, water treatment plants, and residential areas. He

stated animals are generally not disturbed by the facility and noted that sheep are often used for vegetation management, as goats can damage equipment.

The solar farm would cover about 8.4 acres of the 11.66-acre property, and the parcels would be merged after purchase. Mr. Crowley stated the panels would not create glare, noting they absorb light and are approved for use near airports. He said the land is flat enough that glare should not be an issue in this location.

Mr. Crowley explained that most wiring would be buried, with only short exposed connections at the panels and inverters. Vegetation would be managed primarily through mowing and native plantings, avoiding chemical use. There would be no lighting on the site, leaving it dark at night.

He stated the system would be continuously monitored and that emergency services would be contacted through 911 if needed. Fire risk is very low, with only wire coatings considered flammable. Equipment would be clearly marked, and fencing options could include barbed wire if required, though he preferred less aggressive options with landscaping.

In response to questions from the Board, Mr. Crowley said construction would need to begin by June to qualify for incentives and would not start until the land is purchased. Mr. Smith asked about the buffer between his home and the solar farm. Mr. Crowley stated there would be a fence 50 feet from the property line, the nearest panel would be about 64 feet from the line, and Mr. Smith's home is approximately 300 feet away. Mr. Smith expressed opposition to the project and questioned its economic value and energy output. Mr. Crowley responded that the system would produce about 4 million kilowatt-hours per year and is a typical size for a commercial solar facility.

Mr. Crowley and Mr. N'Vietson stated that power production is limited by state and utility regulations and does not increase costs for ratepayers. Mr. Crowley added that the project would benefit the community by adding clean energy to the grid.

Patricia Thompson and Jodi Fresch were sworn in.

Patricia Thompson of 929 Oakridge Drive stated that she lives approximately one-quarter mile from the proposed facility. Mr. Hochfeld noted there was a question of standing, explaining that a person must be directly impacted by the project, but allowed her to ask her questions with standing to be determined afterward. Ms. Thompson asked about emergency response, specifically who would respond if an incident occurred at the site and how long it would take for someone to arrive. Mr. Crowley stated that an operations company has not yet been selected but would likely be a local provider, though not necessarily located in Johnstown. He explained that in the event of an emergency, 911 would be contacted. When Ms. Thompson noted that emergency response would involve taxpayer resources, Mr. Crowley responded that the project would pay taxes and that emergency services are a public service.

Ms. Thompson also expressed concern that property values in the area could decline due to the solar farm. Mr. Crowley stated he could not speak to property values, noting that the site is zoned commercial and the project is a commercial use. He added that impacts would be greater if homes were located immediately adjacent to the facility, which is not the case. Mr. Crowley reiterated that noise from the facility would not affect animals and that visual screening would be provided around the site.

Mr. Crowley reiterated that they are tax paying.

Jodi Fresch of 1010 Clear Spring Lane stated that she lives slightly more than one-quarter mile from the proposed site. She commented on the appearance of other solar facilities, referencing locations at Vo-Tech and in Portage, and asked Mr. Crowley whether the project would expand further if approved by Richland Township. Mr. Crowley responded that no expansion is planned, as the system size is already at its limit and the available tax credits expire in June. Mr. N'Vietson added that he had installed rooftop solar at his own home and noted that missing the installation timeline would have eliminated the available incentives, emphasizing that the current window for such projects is limited.

Ms. Fresch asked about the expected lifespan of the facility. Mr. Crowley stated that the panels carry 25-year warranties and that the company intends to operate the system for that full period. She then asked what would occur if a panel failed. Mr. Crowley explained that the system consists of 14 strings, and while a failed panel would reduce output, the system would continue to operate at a reduced level. He stated that failed panels would be addressed through manufacturer warranties and that reduced production has already been accounted for in project planning.

Ms. Fresch expressed concern about potential impacts on wildlife due to fencing around the site. Mr. Crowley responded that the property is zoned commercial and is not designated as a conservation area, adding that some smaller wildlife would likely return to the area. He noted that while deer are capable of jumping fences, the intent is to prevent them from entering the site. Ms. Fresch also asked whether noise from the facility could affect animals. Mr. Crowley stated that animals typically move around the facility and are not driven away by the sound.

Ms. Fresch questioned whether actual weather conditions could reduce production and whether the project would continue operating once the company recovered its investment. Mr. Crowley responded that there would be no reason to abandon a functioning system, even if it operated below peak performance. He stated that at the end of the project's life, the panels would either be recycled or disposed of prior to selling the property.

Mr. Crowley explained that the project needs careful planning and wouldn't be worthwhile if the panels failed within five years. He said the company has done its due diligence and doesn't expect that to happen, noting that only about one in 100 panels might fail. They've researched and selected reliable modules, so they don't anticipate significant issues.

He added that investors provide the full cash value of the project upfront and use it for their own tax deductions. The company has experience with solar farms in the U.S. for four years and has successfully developed and sold several projects.

Mr. Crowley emphasized that the board has all the necessary information and that the project provides clean, in-demand energy, which benefits the community. While he acknowledged that some trees would need to be removed, he stressed that the overall impact is for the greater good.

The board took a recess from 7:19 pm until 7:47 pm.

Mr. Crowley added that he believes the project will bring value to the area. Since it's a commercial venture, it is expected to generate economic activity while providing clean energy, making it a win-win for the community.

Mr. Wess made a motion to continue the hearing on Tuesday, December 30, 2025 at 5:50 pm to render a decision. The board will take no further testimony or evidence at that time. Seconded by Mr. Kniss. All in favor.

Mr. Patrick added that the applicant does not need to be present at the continuation hearing.

Respectfully submitted,

T.Shomo

Tiffany Shomo, secretary