

Dear Keene Township Neighbor,

Did you know that in 2018, our township board approved a solar energy ordinance that allows industrial solar farms in our community? Did you know that this year, changes to that ordinance were approved, and that more changes are being worked on? Did you know that a global renewable energy company, Invenergy LLC, has been signing easements on land in Keene Township since 2019?

An Ionia County deeds search reveals that Invenergy has signed 19 easements with landowners in our township, dating back to April of 2019. Those easements include 65 parcels of land, totaling 2,721 acres, which is 11.8% of the property in our township. The Board says the recent ordinance amendment was made “mostly” to allow larger residential installations without needing a permit. At the May Board meeting, the Invenergy representative in attendance stated they will be installing test poles, but could not give a specific timeline.

The installation of commercial solar facilities directly contradicts the Keene Township Master Plan (which can be found on the township’s website by going to the Information menu then clicking Zoning). According to that plan, many of the parcels that have easements signed are listed as Prime or Unique Farmlands by the Soil Conservation Service and “Preservation of these lands in agricultural use will be of primary importance given the significance of agriculture to the township economy,” (page 40). Also from the Master Plan:

Page 43: “Take no action to promote growth that is in conflict with the rural environment and character that currently exists within Keene Township,” and “Industrial, commercial, and other public utility or service intensive uses could locate more advantageously in the cities of Lowell, Belding, Saranac, Ionia, or in the Grand Rapids metropolitan area. The community survey also establishes the fact that there is no need or desire for these uses in the Township.”

Page 58: “all unnecessary non-agricultural development should be discouraged.”

The ordinance that is currently in place only requires a 100 foot setback from property lines, and there is no cap on the number of acres that could be converted to commercial solar. The panels can be 30 feet high (though a taller structure may be approved if a need for more height can be demonstrated such as nearby trees, buildings, or topography). You can find a link to the current ordinance on the township website’s home page.

In March, the planning commission proposed changes to the zoning ordinance. Changes to the small and large solar system sections were approved, and a section was added for medium sized solar systems. The Board was not satisfied with the changes to the commercial solar section, so that section was sent back to the planning commission for additional work. The planning commission meets again on August 16th at 7:00pm at the township hall, and it is expected that they will be working on the solar ordinance at that time. A group of concerned Keene township residents has formed under the name Protect Keene, and we encourage you to attend this meeting along with all other township meetings, including the July 12th Township Board meeting (7:00pm at the township hall).

Our group has numerous questions and concerns about this project. Of those are reduced property values and impacts to adjacent properties, local economic impact, conflicts of interest (such as a Board member and a Planning Commission member signing easements with Invenergy), wildlife displacement, drainage concerns, health and safety concerns, and environmental impact, along with violations of the Open Meetings Act (Act 267 of 1976). A resident requested copies of township meeting minutes and learned that 23 out of 50 of the monthly Board meeting minutes from the last 4 years are missing.

The township board held an informational meeting about the project on 6/23 at Saranac High School. Residents were told that there would be representatives present from Invenergy, MSU Extension, the

Township Board, and ITC Holdings (the company that manages the big power lines). However, no one from Invenergy attended the meeting. Residents had been asked to submit all questions in advance so the panel could prepare their answers. The questions that were sent in were posted on the Keene Township website (but have since been removed). There were approximately 10 pages worth of questions submitted. Many of the questions were not addressed at the meeting, and most of the answers that were provided were unclear.

Also on 6/23, we learned from an article in The Daily News that there had been a private meeting held at a farmer's residence in Keene Township where Invenergy set up the speakers and presented information to at least 1 of our local officials (an Ionia County Commissioner). At this time, we do not have any other details regarding this event. Prior to that meeting, a member of Protect Keene was told by an Ionia County official that township officials answer to the people who elected them, not the County Board of Commissioners, so they have no input on township affairs. Although the topic of solar energy was not on the agenda at the County Board of Commissioners meeting, it was discussed, and the chairman stated, "Over 50% of their energy in Germany comes from solar." However, the International Trade Administration's website shows Germany using only 9% solar, with other sites reporting anywhere between 8 and 10%.

Protect Keene has obtained an attorney, who sent a letter to the township board outlining the Open Meetings Act (OMA) violations specifically for the passing of the solar ordinance amendment and requesting that it be rescinded. The township has stated it cannot be. A resident asked if a survey could be done to see how residents in the township feel about solar, and it has not been. Another resident asked if a moratorium could be placed on any solar projects until the township finalizes the ordinance (Montcalm Twp, Douglass Twp, and Pine Twp in Montcalm County all placed moratoriums on wind energy projects while they re-evaluated and amended their existing ordinances), and our township supervisor said no. It was asked if residents could vote on the issue. Again, the answer was no, so we are proceeding with the next legal step, which is to pursue a recall on 4 of the 5 Board positions (our clerk was appointed for the interim following the early retirement of the previous clerk, so will be up for election in November and is not eligible for recall.)

You may soon be contacted by a member of our group to ask if you're interested in signing a petition. We want to make sure you have an opportunity to research this issue beforehand and that you're given a chance to sign if you wish to. We will be respectful of your personal decision(s). There are four petitions total: one for the township supervisor, one for the treasurer, and one for each of the two trustees. If signing, you can sign all four, or you can choose which ones you'd like to sign. If enough signatures are gathered, those positions will be on the November 8th ballot. Recall elections automatically have the person who is currently holding the position on them as a candidate. For example, if a petition to recall a trustee gathered the required number of signatures, then the election would allow you to choose between the existing trustee and anyone else who was running for that position.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Respectfully,

Protect Keene

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