



Committee: Economic Matters

Testimony on: HB1036 “Public Utilities - Generating Stations - Generation and Siting (Renewable Energy Certainty Act)”

Position: Unfavorable

Hearing Date: February 28, 2025

Valleys Planning Council, a non-profit that conserves land and resources, preserves historic character and maintains the rural feel and land uses in northwestern Baltimore County, urges an unfavorable report on HB1036, which would remove control over siting and developing solar generation and energy storage facilities.

For years, Maryland has struggled with the issue of solar siting. While the push for renewable energy is important, it must not come at the cost of responsible land use planning, agricultural preservation, and local authority. HB1036 would have long-term consequences, undermining local decision-making and sacrificing valuable farmland and forests without sufficient safeguards.

1. Agricultural Land Is the Primary Target for Solar Development

Solar developers prioritize agricultural land because it is relatively flat, unshaded, and inexpensive to develop. However, this comes at a steep cost—once farmland is developed, it is permanently altered. Developers argue that solar panels can be removed after 25 or 30 years, allowing the land to return to farming. But in reality, how likely is it that Maryland would choose to remove solar energy infrastructure in the future? And even if it did, how many farmers would still be available to restore the land to agricultural use?

2. Maryland Has Alternatives for Solar Siting

There are far more suitable locations for solar installations that do not require sacrificing farmland. A 2019 study by the Valleys Planning Council found that Baltimore County and Baltimore City alone have more than **30,000 acres** of optimal solar sites, including rooftops, parking lots, and brownfields. These areas would not require the destruction of active farmland or forests. Yet, HB1036 provides no guardrails to steer solar development toward these less disruptive alternatives.

3. Environmental Risks and Uncertain Long-Term Consequences

The environmental impact of large-scale solar development on farmland and forests is not fully understood. Concerns include:

- **Soil degradation:** Long-term solar panel coverage, topsoil removal, grading, and construction-related compaction could leave soil unsuitable for future farming. There is no strong evidence proving that land covered by solar panels for decades can return to productive agriculture as solar installations have not been around for long enough to assess the consequences.
- **Deforestation:** Clearing forests for solar development eliminates their contribution to combatting climate change. Trees act as carbon sinks, and their removal not only releases stored carbon but also eliminates

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critical habitat for wildlife. Even if land were replanted in the future, it would take decades to regain lost ecological benefits.

- **Habitat disruption:** Large-scale solar installations could fragment ecosystems, threaten local wildlife, and alter natural water drainage patterns.

4. Energy Storage Projects Pose Safety Risks

Beyond solar installations, energy storage projects—such as large-scale battery facilities—introduce significant safety concerns. Just last month, California saw its fourth major battery storage fire at the same facility since 2019. It burned for five days, releasing smoke all the while. Without local oversight, these facilities could be built too close to sensitive areas, placing residents and wildlife at risk.

5. Undermining Local Authority and Community Involvement

HB1036 strips counties of their zoning and planning authority over solar projects. Many counties have been working for years to establish fair, balanced policies on solar siting. This bill would override those efforts, removing any negotiating power counties have with developers.

Additionally, developers who might otherwise be willing to compromise with local communities—such as adjusting setbacks or adding screening to reduce visual impact—would have no obligation to do so. The bill fails to provide sufficient opportunities for meaningful public engagement, leaving local residents with little say in decisions that directly affect their communities.

6. Counties Need a Seat at the Table

A county that cannot regulate or tax solar projects is a county that has lost its authority. Rather than imposing a blanket policy that disregards local needs, Maryland should work collaboratively with counties to establish guidelines that:

- Protect valuable agricultural land
- Preserve community character and environmental resources
- Encourage solar development in appropriate locations

For these reasons, I respectfully urge an unfavorable vote on HB1036. Thoughtful, balanced policy—not top-down mandates—will ensure that Maryland expands its renewable energy capacity **without sacrificing farmland, local authority, or community well-being.**

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