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TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

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INDEPENDENT PLANNING COMMISSION

**CULCAIRN SOLAR FARM
MEETING WITH GREATER HUME SHIRE COUNCIL**

COMMISSION PANEL: **ANDREW HUTTON (Chair)**
PROFESSOR ZADA LIPMAN

**COMMISSION
SECRETARIAT:** **JANE ANDERSON (Senior Planning Officer)**
STEVE BARRY (Director)

**GREATER HUME
SHIRE COUNCIL:** **HEATHER WILTON (Mayor)**
DOUG MEYER (Deputy Mayor)
TONY QUINN (Councillor)
LEA PARKER (Councillor)
STEVEN PINNUCK (General Manager)
COLIN KANE (Director Environment & Planning)

LOCATION: **VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE**

DATE: **1.46 PM, THURSDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2021**

MR HUTTON: Okay. All right. Well, thanks again. It seems like we're all up and running. Thank you so much for your time. We do appreciate the opportunity to have a conversation with council around this proposal. But before I begin, I would just like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and
5 pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. Welcome to the meeting today on the on the Culcairn Solar Farm Project SD 10288. Neoen Australia Proprietary Limited proposes to develop a 350 megawatt solar farm with a battery storage facility approximately four kilometres southwest of Culcairn in the Riverina region of New South Wales. My name is Andrew Hutton, and I'm the chair of this
10 commission panel. I am joined by my fellow commissioner, professor Zada Lipman. We're also joined by Jane Anderson of the office of the independent planning commission.

15 In the interests of openness and transparency and to ensure the full capture of the information, today's meeting will be recorded and a full transcript will be produced and made available on the commission's website. This meeting is one part of the commissioner's considerations of this matter and will form one of several sources of information upon which the commission will base its determination. It is important, as I said, for the commissioners to ask questions of attendees and to clarify issues
20 whenever it is considered appropriate. And if you're asked a question and you're not in a position to answer, please do feel free to take that question on notice and provide any additional information in writing which we'll also put up on our website.

25 To assist in the audio transcription, I do ask that all members here today, when they first speak, introduce themselves, and that all members ensure they do not speak over the top of each other just so that we can get an accurate transcript for this particular meeting. I would also like to just note that myself and Professor Lipman have had the opportunity to visit the site on the 29th of October. We were able to take a look around the proposal, and there's also an inspection notice up on the commission's
30 website in that regard. On the same – or during the same visit, we also visited on the 30th of October the residence known as R24. And we had the opportunity to speak with the resident and also visit that property.

35 Okay. So we will begin. Look, once again, can I say thank you very much for everybody making the time available this afternoon. We do certainly value this opportunity to have a conversation with you around this proposal. We have sent through an agenda, which is as much to sort of guide the conversation as anything. But certainly, we've identified a couple of key issues that we think – you know, we'd like to have a conversation with council about. But before we get to that, we're quite
40 interested to, I guess, get an overview of council's position in this particular proposal. We understand it remains opposed to the development. So we just wanted to clarify that. And we're also keen to get some comments from you around the Department's assessment report and the proposed draft conditions. But we would also be happy to have a conversation about any relevant issues or hear any feedback
45 that you feel is appropriate for the panel to hear. So with that, Colin, is it appropriate that I pass back to you to commence that conversation?

MR KANE: I think so, Andrew. So if I – I've read the Department's assessment report and conditions, and I'm relatively comfortable with the assessment report. There's not really anything there that I would take them to task on. And the same for the conditions that are pretty standard conditions now that I'm familiar with for
5 similar solar farm developments in our council area. So from those two aspects, I'm relatively comfortable with the assessment report, like I said, and those conditions. I'm just mindful today, Andrew, to let the councillors have a say about the solar farms and the like. I'm happy to answer all the questions from Professor Zada. So anything that you might want me to – get my professional opinion on, I'm happy
10 to do that. But I'm mindful of the time that we've got, and there's a couple – there's a number of councillors here today that want to address that so – but coming back, just – I'm happy to kick off in a sense – to go through my opinion on these key issues, if you like. Is that a good way to start?

15 MR HUTTON: Yes. Thank you, Colin.

MR KANE: Yes. Okay. So I'm familiar with the evolution of the project in that it had lands in the north of Cummings Road, which has been deleted from the project now. And also, I'm familiar with the more recent amendments to increase the
20 setbacks on the remaining land. Obviously, from adjacent landholder's perspective, that's got to be a betterment. Whether it's a betterment enough for them to be satisfied with the development, I can't comment on that. But the reduction in the size of development has to in that sense. I think I will skip over the agricultural land.

25 For my point – my opinion on that agricultural land is that there seems to be some conjecture as to how good this land is in terms of agricultural class. For my own opinion, there could be some properties with land that needs to be addressed in order for it to be productive land. But from what I can observe, if they are addressed – the
30 issues with the soil and the like, then it can be very productive. So there can be issues that I'm not qualified to comment on. But from my observations, like I said, the farming practices offset some of those issues, and it's still very very viable, from my perspective.

35 The visual impact in the landscape and the setbacks – I think the visual impact is really going to be the key to how well this development is accepted once it's actually placed there if it was to be approved. I think the landscape is the key as to whether there's enough and how well it's maintained and how quickly it comes to fruition as to how readily people would object to the development will accept it. I think, you
40 know, if the landscaping is adequate and dense landscaping – I think it would make a good difference to how the development is accepted. Also, that reduce setbacks in the landscaping would have to make a difference to the heat island effect. So the – I think from that perspective, the recent amendments are good. Whether it's good enough, I don't know. I can't comment on the heat island effect. I still maintain
45 there hasn't been enough studies done on the heat island effect on Australian solar farms of this scale. I think it's a big unknown, and really further studies need to be done.

The biodiversity aspects of development are actually a lot better because of the deletion of the northern land where most of the biodiversity impacts were. They're definitely a definite improvement in terms of – because of the amendments. Factory storage I mean, when I read some of the aspects about battery storage that was raised with BIS, it caused me some concerns – just that requirement that the temperature be controlled so that they're not a risk, and then from the potential regulator of this development protection of the environment I still really remain – I'm still not convinced that the council is the best place to be for actual ARA for these developments, particularly where they are battery storage. I just – I know the capacity of council. I don't know the actual scale of these developments and the actual risk, but I still think that job really should stick with the EPA. That's a matter for the regulators who write the legislation to include that as a licensed activity within the Protection of the Environment Obligations Act. So that remains a concern for me.

I think the road upgrade transport group – generally acceptable to council. I think at Amber Road in the Weeamera Road with the seven metre sealed road upgrades – well, I think that aspect – I'm fairly comfortable with that. I think council engineers would be fairly comfortable with that as well.

MR HUTTON: Colin, quick question for that regarding – mindful that there's a quarry to the south and the potential that there could be some construction works for the Walla Walla development, is council satisfied that the road network can take that sort of traffic?

MR KANE: Well, during our internal deliberations my colleagues in the engineering Department seemed happy with it, Andrew, unless - - -

MR HUTTON: Yes.

MR KANE: - - - my manager wants to comment.

MR PINNUCK: Well, the only comment I would make, Andrew, is that the current road to the quarry is of a pretty reasonable standard for a local road.

MR HUTTON: Yes.

MR PINNUCK: Given that it's already carrying significant volumes of quarry traffic.

MR HUTTON: Yes.

MR PINNUCK: So, you know, our expectation would be that that road will hold up okay - - -

MR HUTTON: Yes.

MR PINNUCK: - - - at this point in time.

MR KANE: It may only be – maybe a little bit of the unknown with the actual potential number of vehicles that will be coming out back on to the that
5 intersection’s very good. But if you’re tripling the amount of heavy vehicles that are leaving there that currently use it, I don’t know whether that’s cause for concern. It’s a very good intersection in that there’s ample room for trucks to enter and then accelerate and then merge on. But I think if there was just some trucks, it might become a bit of an issue there. But I don’t know.

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MR HUTTON: It’s okay. I just - - -

MR KANE:

15 MR HUTTON: Yes.

MR KANE: And just finally, before I hand over to the councillors, the VPA – the council has accepted the terms of the VPA with and a draft VPA has pretty well been reconciled. The next stage, subject to the actual application being improved,
20 would be just the advertisements to do. So from that perspective, council is comfortable with VPA – what was offered by the company.

MR PINNUCK: Might be beneficial to talk about the two aspects, though. Like
- - -

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MR HUTTON: Sorry. I’ll just ask you to introduce yourself for the benefit of the transcript, apologies, if you don’t mind, when you speak. Thanks.

MR PINNUCK: Sorry. My apologies, Andrew. Steven Pinnuck, the general
30 manager. This one’s a little bit. This development is a little bit different to the other two in that have been quite specific around having a VPA which council, and then a community benefit fund, which will sit completely outside of council and which will be managed through a philanthropic group. And I think they’re using – I can’t remember. It’s the same philanthropic that the Bendigo Group
35 that the Bendigo Bank used, basically. So there’s two parts to it, and the part that’s in the VPA alone correct? And then there’s a similar amount, which is specifically a community benefit fund, which a separate committee would be set up to manage through this philanthropic trust. So there’s two – unlike the other two where all the funds are coming through council, this one is quite different in its
40 structure.

MR HUTTON: Okay. Thank you for that.

MR PINNUCK: So I’m happy to hand over to the councillors that are present here
45 if you’re happy to hear from them now.

MR HUTTON: We've got them Colin. Thank you for your comments. If you could just introduce yourself, as I indicated to the benefit of the transcript, we would certainly welcome hearing from councillors. So I will hand over to you, Colin, to facilitate that please.

5

MR KANE: I will introduce Councillor Doug Meyer.

MR MEYER: Good afternoon, commissioners

10 MR HUTTON: Good afternoon, Doug.

MR MEYER: That's still high in my mind – that the escalating price of land suggests that this isn't it's, in fact I think the difference between the good and the bad is the fact that it's the people who have occupied those lands as farmers. Even in the last week, the price of land continues to escalate, and none of the real estates could really say why. It's a fact that's united this area and united – it validates what we've been saying for some time. We question ourselves Department of Primary Industries haven't been here, taken account of what's been happening, and there's a lot of criticism from the agricultural industry as to why they haven't been here, why they've been allowed to abscond from the necessity to have this achieved.

There are no set guidelines under the IPP as to what is agricultural lands and what should be considered elsewhere. When you look at other countries throughout the world, they're building solar farms but they're not building on primary agricultural land. If you look at China, for instance, they're building in the deserts. You took part in the recent by-election with Terry – sorry, I can't remember his name. He advocated the establishment of green energy in the Northern Territory with a view to exporting it to Singapore. It shows great potential for being part of Australia's future in the fact that you can export electricity underground for 3,000 kilometres. Therefore, if you can do that, why can't we build solar farms in the less productive areas of Australia so that you can still have the benefit of solar farms supplying capital cities. Why destroy the food basin to build solar farms on those locations?

35

The local farmers, through New South Wales Farmers and they hold firm to those views that we should be building solar farms on lands that aren't productive. I also asked the question of how do you measure minimal impact on receptors and the surrounds that we're in. I have no relationship to this solar farm or any of the others. I am a farmer, but I don't come from that particular area, nor do I have any relevant involved in it. But as a farmer, I question the future of our industry if we continue to build a number of solar farms Australia on the lands that produce the food that we eat and the food that we export.

45 The people who own the grounds of Bomen Solar Farm in Wagga Wagga, which I'm sure you're familiar with, attended a recent New South Wales Farmers meeting and made a very big point of stressing that if we're going to build solar farm in this area,

they must be able to by their relative rural fire services. They must be able to access the rows of solar panels with category 1 tankers. There's been a failing in the Bomen Solar Farm as to that effect, but they found that they can't get these trucks down those rows if there happens to be a fire in them. They also ask had the rural
5 fire service these questions. They'll ask the same things. Has the rural fire service ever done fire services or fire tests in solar farms? Nobody seemed to be able to provide that answer.

10 How can compensation be decided when you can't measure matters such as amenity loss, such as loss of income to those people who surround solar farms? How can you measure the amenity loss when you're going to build solar farms that will take another four or five years to grow the screening so forth that everybody is proposing. It should be suggested that rather, we should be putting in the screening before we allow the solar farms to proceed. If you will allow me to introduce the
15 councillor on my right, councillor Lea Parker who also wants to take part tonight. She's quite vocal about solar. I would ask you to listen to her anything else, I will come back to you after she has finished her presentation.

20 MR HUTTON: Thank you, Councillor Meyer. Yes. We would welcome Councillor Parker to speak to us, so thank you.

MS PARKER: Thank you, Andrew. Councillor Parker, married to a fifth-generation farmer in the district the farm – the solar farm area I really worry about the value of our land being taken up by these developments we – farmers
25 are very proud people of what we produce, and I think that the increasing population that's increasing over one per cent per year on a worldwide basis, food supply is going to be one of our greatest challenges moving forward. And I don't understand why we would be building these, you know, developments on land that is so valuable that it's fetching \$9,000 an acre. I don't know things about weeds and fire, but,
30 you know, I was involved with the fires – the Green Valley fires last year. And it was extremely for everybody involved. And I think that that's something that really needs to be addressed. Because without ability to down pastures and spray then you won't be able to pastures for animals to graze underneath these solar panels. So then you have nothing to graze. Weeds form, and hence the fire danger is
35 increased. I think as a councillor, our environmental plan is to protect and retain productive agricultural land and to protect and conserve any natural assets, and I don't feel like that we're doing that with solar farms. Thank you.

40 MR HUTTON: Thank you. All right. Thank you. Next opportunity to speak.

MR QUINN: Thank you, Mr Chairman. My name is Tony Quinn. I've been a councillor for a fair while. I've been a farmer all my life since I left ag college. I'm a minority voice in council on this issue. I fully support the project. I welcome industry into the shire. I'm a great believer in free enterprise, and this project is very
45 legal within that element. The operators have offered a very generous VPA to council which would fill council's coffers over many years. But they've also offered

an extremely generous community fund, not like the other solar farms. Likely to be a great benefit to the community and to the council.

5 In 1990, I bought a parcel of land one kilometre from where this solar farm is going to be placed. During those 31 years, I have had eight years of very wet years where most of land has been unproductive. If you know where Neoen wants to present their solar farm, you will realise it's all flat country. In 2016, just as in my place, you could bog a duck, the place was so wet. The inputs we put into cropping that year were a total loss. So I leave it to your imagination to figure out what sort of land it is at times. I've got no interest in the project. I'm not really a great believer in renewable energy, but I think that comes with my age. The fact of the matter is this is an industry which I think will be very welcome or should be very welcome in the sire. We badly need industry. The employment spinoffs while it's being created for Culcairn will be amazing. And as a result, the young kids who want part-time jobs will get them in the and the food industry – and you could go on ad infinitum. I actually think it would be a great project, even though I'm a very minority voice in council. Thank you for listening.

MR HUTTON: Thank you for your comments, councillor. It's appreciated.
20 Heather, I was wondering whether you were intending to make some comments at all.

MS WILTON: No. Thank you. No. I'm here purely in a listening - - -

25 MR HUTTON: No worries.

MS WILTON: Just to see what is being said. Thank you.

MR HUTTON: Thank you. Thank you. I just want to make sure you were given the opportunity. All right. We certainly acknowledge what you've said, and we certainly take all those comments in regard. Is there anything else there that anyone that anyone would like to present to the panel, or – Zada, whether you have some questions or comments for the councillors.

35 PROF LIPMAN: I just had one question. They seem to – they applicant seems to have indicated a very high water usage during construction, at least compared to other 62 million litres, I think – and indicated that they had an agreement with council to either obtain water from the water from the council standpipe can you elaborate on that there?

40 MR KANE: Yes. I think I will have to take that on notice. There has been some discussions with council about the supply of the water. I will have to take that on notice and check with my colleagues and be certain that exactly how far discussions have been.

45 MR HUTTON: That's fine. Thank you.

PROF LIPMAN: And – yes. The other thing is you mention in one of your submissions that you are concerned about the planting – you thought that the planting should be a bit more mature than was being proposed. In view of the change to have you changed your view on that, or what is your current view?

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MR KANE: Well, I think it's particularly tricky with the plans. I think they would have to be very in order that they don't get – in some years that they don't get choked out by grasses and because the – if they're small seedlings, in some years the grasses will just completely obliterate it. So the management of those setbacks – those are really important. As I said earlier, I think it would just – it would be very – it would be a very telling point as to how well the development could be accepted is to how well these planning are established and then maintained. That would be a very key factor. So, look, I don't really want to comment about the size of the plans. Obviously, the advanced plans may have some advantages with competition from grasses and the like. But then sometimes, in my experience, small can really catch up quite quickly and actually become a better tree than more advanced plantings. I think it's – that's about all I can say with my expertise. I'm just mindful that – how rapidly the grasslands can grow, and potential just to completely choke it out I don't know whether the councillors want to add anything about that.

20

MR MEYER: I would suggest that the people who have been leasing this country in the last few years to produce growth rates they do achieve and the tonnage they have been able to move off the property, and that's on property there's a lot of environmental hypocrisy regarding damaging the environment and all that sort of things. But there are some real questions that people seek answers on in 30 years time or before when the plants wind down and they cease are there going to be funds available to provide the restoration that's contemplated in those plans that are before you. There are a number of questions like that that industry is asking. Nobody has ever made comment on it. Nobody has ever addressed the issue. There will be some problems with another big event that's held every September in this region if all the accommodation throughout the area is booked out by people building solar farms. In fact, it will destroy that that's held at the end of each of each year because with the sheer physical size of it – books every room in Albury and Wagga and all placed in between. In some cases, people are stopping over 150 kilometres away from the particular event. That's a very real concern to a community that's not involved in the solar farms in that region.

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We don't see any energy benefit to the local community. We understand that all of this generated provided to the capital cities and the industries that function within those capital cities. A lot of us ask questions – if they need so much power, why don't they do some of their own look at conserving switching some of their lights off at night. If you walk around Sydney or Melbourne at any particular time, everything blossoms. Everything burns. Everything glows. Nobody seems to have taken whatsoever about conserving energy in that aspect.

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There's probably 100 things that I can put forward. You're having another function with the real protesters. Most of those things will be brought to your notice when that takes place. I think it's in another week. Certainly, none of us will be taking part but I would urge you to listen to those, because most of the other receptors
5 do feel they're going to be disadvantaged they need to have some notice taken of what they want to say. These people have been there for plus 100 years. Many of them are the original founding families of the area, and they feel that nobody has listened. Thank you for the time.

10 MR HUTTON: Yes. Thank you, Councillor Meyer. I appreciate those comments. Okay. If everyone is happy, I would just like to thank you – we'll just check there's no more comments first from everybody.

MS WILTON: Andrew, could I just make a few comments, please.
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MR HUTTON: Yes. Go ahead, Heather.

MS WILTON: I'm the mayor of Greater Hume. I am a supporter of the solar energy business full stop. My family and I have had solar energy on our roof since
20 about late 1960 when it started to be the very early business, and we've loved it ever since. Now, I still like solar energy. I think it has a lot of benefits for our communities and for the nation. I understand the concerns that have been raised by many people here next to me today and over the last few years, from landholders and other residents. I understand those concerns. But I do think I am rather favouring
25 the comments made by my colleague Mr Quinn in that there will be overall benefits ultimately for a number of years in this community which will be fantastic for the community, not the least being job opportunities.

And I think – you know, we just can't knock – well, stop development and progress
30 in any of these places. And I think it's a well-known fact that most urban development takes over rural land. That happens nearly everywhere around Australia, certainly. And we very, very rarely hear of the detrimental effects is wreaking on many communities. And I don't think there are anywhere near the benefits for those communities that would be accruing through this solar business.
35 So I am a supporter. I always have been. I've never varied from that position. Thanks, Andrew.

MR HUTTON: All right. Thank you very much. Thank you. All right. Well, just, I guess, finally, thank you again for your time. I do appreciate the time you've taken
40 to come and talk to use today. Certainly, we've heard those comments, and we will give them regard as part of our process. Thanks for your time. And what I will do now is I will just thank you again and close the meetings team. Thanks and good afternoon.

45 MS WILTON: Thank you.

MR HUTTON: Thank you.

MEETING CONCLUDED

[2.19 pm]