

Landowners share why they partnered with solar project

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FRANKLIN COUNTY, Kan. — Franklin County landowners are sharing why they decided to lease their land to Orion Renewable Energy for the solar development company's Prairie Sunlight project.

The Prairie Sunlight project is an approximately 185 MW solar energy development in Franklin about a mile south of Ottawa. Several landowners have agreed to lease part of their land, allowing Orion to build the project on their properties.

For the community.

John Wray's reason to lease with Orion came after a lot of conversation.

"I can't recall what year Orion first came out but they stopped by our house on two or three different occasions and we always told them no," said Wray.

However, Wray began to do his own research.

"The more I kept looking into it, the more I thought about things that could help the community," said Wray. "Me, my wife, my family and a lot of other people are community-oriented."

Wray, a leader of sorts with a history of serving on county, state and national boards and committees, wanted to make sure that if Orion was going to build their project, then it was going to serve the people of Franklin County.

Wray talked extensively with Orion.

"I asked them how this will help the community," said Wray. "They told me about the money that could possibly benefit the county."

One of Wray's first questions was how the Prairie Sunlight project could address the increase in property taxes.

"I realize a project like this is not going to make property taxes go down but what I was thinking was that maybe it could level them off somehow," said Wray.

Wray asked Orion where else the money from the Prairie Sunlight project could go, with an emphasis on schools.

Most of the project, pending approval, would be built on the land of people with children attending Ottawa USD 290. Wray wanted to make sure that all Franklin County school districts benefited.

Franklin County has four unified school districts.

“They [Orion] agreed upon that,” said Wray. “Whether that was their intent or not, I am just telling what I found out.”

John Wray was the very last to lease with Orion. His land is one of the older tenured farm lands in the area.

“My thought process was that I am a seventh generation farmer,” said Wray. “Not at the exact farm I am at; my father purchased this land in the early sixties.”

Wray farms with his son and has four grandchildren who could potentially be the future of agriculture on his land, which led to his decision to lease with Orion.

“I wanted the opportunity that the land will be preserved for them,” said Wray. “The solar project is a way that we can preserve it; at least in agriculture.”

Wray also discussed his environmental and economic concerns with Orion.

A former volunteer fireman of 25 years, Wray said he understands the concerns that the Prairie Sunlight development might cause should there be a fire on the lands it is on.

“I went to Orion and I asked them to look into it and they answered my questions,” said Wray. “It is something they have discussed and I know there is money set aside that would help not only the local fire department but the county-wide fire department as well.”

Through his conversations with Orion and having his own lawyer look at the project proposal, Wray said the panels from the solar project would be discreet and the least distracting it could be on leased land, as well as strategically placed to mitigate the possibility of accidents without disturbing the land.

Wray is leasing a little over 180 acres to Orion, which he described as about 15% of his land.

“The thing is, part of this property is around my own home,” said Wray. “It’s not far away on purpose in someone else’s backyard; it’s in my backyard.”

Having ready and sustainable energy is a big advantage Wray considered.

“Solar is just going to be a small part of helping the community,” said Wray.

He believes the U.S. is going to face an energy crisis soon.

“Franklin County sits 50 miles away from two different plants, one’s coal and the other is nuclear,” said Wray. “They’re going to shut down at some point, not today, not tomorrow but some time in the future, so, some kind of energy is going to have to be in place to help pick that up.”

Wray said he understood the language of the lease with the help of a lawyer with an expertise in solar and wind negotiations.

“I just want the record straight that these landowners are not willing to sell their land to Orion or any other energy company,” said Wray.

Ultimately, Wray signed because he was satisfied with what the Prairie Sunlight project, with its longevity and sustainability, could bring to Franklin County for years to come. Ensuring steady prosperity.

Dwayne LaGalle, a farmer and rancher, has agreed to lease about half the land he owns to Orion.

“I am trying to spread some risk in order to be a little more diversified,” said LaGalle.

“Farming is super risky, it all depends on the weather and commodity prices, so, it can be a roller coaster.”

LaGalle said his reasons to sign with Orion was because the solar development project will supply steady income to ensure he can keep farming and living on his land.

“It’s a 30-year contract, I know I am going to make money,” said LaGalle. “Farming is a lot of risk. I can make a lot more money selling sunshine and energy than I can selling grain or cattle.”

LaGalle said he feels confident that Orion will do good by the environment and economy and does not have many concerns.

“The concerns that I had, Orion addressed and I feel comfortable with their thoughts and their concerns,” said LaGalle. “There is money set at escrow if this were not all to be profitable in the future in ten or 20 years.

LaGalle added that there is also money set aside for the cleanup and decommission of the Prairie Sunlight project with has a life expectancy of around 30 years.

According to LaGalle, the ground where the solar panels will go will be planted with grass, which will give the ground the benefit of a break from growing crops year round.

“At the end of the day, thirty years down the road, I think the farm will be more productive,” said LaGalle. “We’ll still own the property. It’s just a different income from acres that are still mine.”

LaGalle said he understood the language of the lease and that it was explained properly, but he still took it to two different attorneys.

“I got their feelings on it because I didn’t want to get blindsides on it,” said LaGalle.

“Both of these attorneys reviewed the paper work and they felt like it was legitimate.”

LaGalle’s attorneys explained things to him that captured their attention but he ultimately felt comfortable in what he learned to agree to lease his land.

LaGalle thinks the Prairie Sunlight project giving part of his land a break from growing crops will yield better crops once the project is retired and removed from his land.

“I’ve bought land where there was grass and replaced it with crops and it is amazing how much better the crops grow in an area that has not been strained production-wise year after year,” said LaGalle. “When it comes harvest time and you’re harvesting a field, you can tell the difference exactly between what was in grass and was farmed previously because there’s a substantial difference in production on the ground that’s been in grass.”

According to LaGalle, that should be the case when the Prairie Sunlight project is decommissioned.

LaGalle’s commodities include wheat, soybeans and sorghum, as well as cattle.

LaGalle has great trust in the Prairie Sunlight project.

“The Prairie Sunlight project is going to benefit everyone that lives in Franklin County,” said LaGalle. “Especially if you’re a property owner because it is going to help with our property taxes.”

LaGalle cited his trust in Orion with what the production of the Wolf Creek Generating Station, the nuclear power plant 50 miles from Franklin County, has done for Burlington, Kan.

He suspects that people were upset when that project was in development about 45 years ago.

“But it has done amazing things for Coffey County,” said LaGalle. “They have a state-of-the-art library, they have a fabulous swimming pool and a high percentage of Coffey

County roads are paved because they have all of this extra income from this energy source.”

While LaGalle does not think the Prairie Sunlight project will generate that same amount of revenue for Franklin County, he thinks it will be enough to help taxpayers regardless if they paying taxes for land or housing.

“Or whether you’re involved the road and bridge department, the fire or police department, it all goes up,” said LaGalle. “Consequently, so do our taxes to keep these people employed.”

LaGalle sees the Prairie Sunlight project as a way to level off taxes until another way to pay those expenses besides just the taxpayers is an option.

LaGalle said the solar project is not going to be a noisy final product, but a quiet one that will generate money for Franklin County.

“This was a business decision for me, I won’t dispute that,” said LaGalle. “But this is going to do a lot of good for the county.”

Farm security.

Michael Fehrenbach’s father signed to lease his land with Orion before he died but the reason for the continued lease agreement is the same: farm security.

“We don’t have to worry about if it is going to rain or rain too much,” said Fehrenbach.

“It is just farm security and knowing you are going to have income for the next twenty-five to thirty years.”

Fehrenbach said that they could barely get crops in in 2019 due to it raining too much, then another year crops were too impacted by drought to be worth harvesting.

To him and for those reasons, it just makes sense to lease with Orion.

“You’re really just flying by the skin of your pants to be a farmer these days,” said Fehrenbach.

Fehrenbach, like LaGalle, trusts Orion’s intention with his land and that the land will be better for solar development.

“Its going to be planted with native grasses to benefit the bees and quail and the land,” said Fehrenbach. “The land will benefit 30 years from now after the project leaves the property.”

Fehrenbach looks forward to the benefits of the community will receive from him leasing his land to Orion, specifically the roads.

He said Franklin County cannot afford to maintain the roads with their budget now.

“The roads are mud pits when it rains and blows dust when it doesn’t,” he said.

Fehrenbach believes the county will be able to afford to build and maintain better roads once Orion, should they be, is permitted to develop in Franklin County.

Fehrenbach was with his father when Orion was explaining the lease agreement, so was prepared to take over.

One of the major concerns they expressed to Orion was the maintenance of and around the Prairie Sunlight project around the land.

“If you don’t mow a pasture, thorn and cedar trees will take over,” explained

Fehrenbach. “They [Orion] told us someone would be out there to mow it. They don’t want the grass to be taller than the solar panels or they will get shaded.”

Overall, the Fehrenbachs said they were comfortable and understood the lease agreement.

Michael Fehrenbach has already planned to put sheep on his land to help maintain the quality of the land situated under and around the solar panels.

“Sheep will maintain the grass and you won’t have the physical labor of going and doing it by hand or with diesel machines,” said Fehrenbach.

Fehrenbach said Orion wants to lease 350 of his around 400 acres and is confident with the company’s development on his land.

Landowners have been received backlash

There have been vocal condemnation of the landowners who have leased with Orion, and according to Dwayne LaGalle and Michael Fehrenbach, this includes signs with leasing landowners names on them.

“They’re not mad enough to destroy my equipment but I’m very concerned about where I park at night because clearly not everyone is happy,” said LaGalle. “It doesn’t make me feel very good.”

LaGalle’s family has a history of service within the community, so he did not expect that level of opposition.

“Orion had a meeting last spring, and the people disagreeing with Orion all got together,” said LaGalle. “Outside of the community building was a sign that had my name and four or five different landowners’ names listed, on the front of the building when you walk in, and it said they do not want solar and want Orion to leave.”

Despite this, Wray, LaGalle and Fehrenbach do not think this will affect their lease agreement with Orion nor the development of the Prairie Sunlight project.