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Solar farm developer calls farmland leases valid

By Karyn Saemann

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The Chicago developer of a proposed 6,300 acre solar farm west of Cambridge has responded to a challenge from the town of Christiana and two town residents, who last month said leases offered to area property owners are unconstitutional, and that the project cannot proceed.

Town residents Roxann Engelstad and Edward Lovell and the town of Christiana asked the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin in mid-February to reject an application for a certificate of public convenience and necessity for the proposed Koshkonong Solar Energy Center, based on the state constitution that they say limits the allowed duration of farmland leases.

Koshkonong Solar Energy Center is a subsidiary of Invenery, LLC, of Chicago.

The PSC expects to make a decision this spring on whether to grant a certificate of public convenience and necessity for the 300-megawatt solar farm and 165-megawatt battery storage facility proposed in the towns of Deerfield and Christiana. About 2,400 of its acres are envisioned to be installed with solar panels, with the rest buffer zone. The project would also include a new transmission line, underground connector lines and a new substation.

Engelstad, Lovell and the town of Christiana argued in February that long-term leases offered to rural property owners, on whose land solar panels would be installed, violate the state constitution that limits farmland leases to 15 years. They also said the time required to develop the solar farm, followed by initial 25-year leases and potential 25-year extensions, could span up to 60 years.

The proposed project area "is heavily dominated by row crop agriculture, primarily composed of corn and soybeans," their Feb. 16 filing stated. "The application presents a project that depends on violating our state's constitution. The commission cannot approve a CPCN that relies on void leases."

The Public Service Commission is also concurrently reviewing the joint application from Wisconsin Electric Power Company (WEPCO), Wisconsin Public Service Corporation (WPSC) and Madison Gas and Electric Company (MGE) to buy and operate the proposed solar farm once it's in place.

Engelstad, Lovell and the town of Christiana also, in a filing in mid-February, asked the commission to dismiss, also due to non-allowed farmland leases, that application from the utility companies.

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FOREST SCHOOL

Cambridge outdoor immersion program one of the first in state

By Karyn Saemann

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It's 9 a.m. on a Thursday in late February and Amy Johnson's class is assembling in a setting far removed from what she taught in for more than 20 years.

As bundled children arrive with backpacks, prepared to spend the day, Johnson and an aide gather them around the outdoor fire ring at Hoard Curtis Scout Camp near Cambridge.

Winter-bare trees tower above, frozen Lake Ripley is below, down a steep bank, and the wind is biting with the promise of more snow.

Over the next few hours, they'll trek the woods, write words with sticks in the snow, slide on the lake ice and share a snack around the fire, taking only occasional breaks in the camp's heated lodge.

Half a dozen young children are in attendance this winter day at Johnson's Evergreen Forest School, that was founded in mid-2021, initially meeting at Aztalan State Park near Jefferson.

The school relocated to Hoard Curtis in January.

The children aren't just visiting for the day, spending a few hours in nature. This isn't a field trip, but rather, a daily school space.

Evergreen Forest School is a pioneer in Wisconsin, one of a handful of full-immersion outdoor schools in the state.

Not that the state of Wisconsin yet recognizes it as so.

The idea of nature-immersion forest schools is so new in the state, still spreading slowly inland from the northeast U.S. and west coast after taking root in Scandinavian countries early in the 20th Century, that there isn't yet a licensing mechanism in Wisconsin.

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Karyn Saemann

A child plays in February during Evergreen Forest School at Hoard Curtis Scout Camp near Cambridge.



Karyn Saemann

Amy Johnson and an aide lead an opening circle around an outdoor fire in February, during Evergreen Forest School at Hoard Curtis Scout Camp near Cambridge.



Karyn Saemann

Students attend an opening circle around an outdoor fire in February, during Evergreen Forest School at Hoard Curtis Scout Camp near Cambridge.

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Program

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Johnson's families are officially homeschooling their children and sending them to her as an enrichment program.

An online map maintained on the joint website of a group called Natural Start Alliance and the North American Association of Environmental Education, based in Washington, D.C., shows a growing concentration of programs in the northeast and on the west coast, now pushing into the Midwest.

State regulators have been slow to catch up, however. In 2019, Washington became the first state to create a licensing path for preschools to operate entirely outdoors, initially as a pilot program. Colorado followed, granting its first outdoor preschool licenses in 2021. And in January, Maryland approved a 3-year outdoor preschool licensing pilot program.

Wisconsin has groups advocating for more support and recognition of the uniqueness of forest schools, including the Wisconsin Nature Based Early Childhood Association. It's a statewide collaborative with ties to the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Milwaukee, the Aldo Leopold Nature Center in Baraboo and other outdoor education organizations.

Kaisee Wiesmueller, director of Tiny Green Trees Nature Based Child-care and Forest School, that enrolls infants through school-aged children at two locations in the Milwaukee area that's within walking distance of county parks that they spend time in daily, said she closely monitors emerging news about forest schools in the state.

Wiesmueller said has seen no indication that Wisconsin is poised to follow Washington, Colorado and Maryland with outdoor preschool licensing.

Wiesmueller predicts such licensing is coming. But for now, the handful of forest schools in Wisconsin, including Tiny Green Trees and Evergreen Forest School, are making do with an a non-existent regulatory framework that requires them to either fit what they're doing under the umbrella of an already licensed child care center, or to call it homeschool enrichment even if children attend all day, every day.

Public schools

And while there are plenty of traditional public and private elementary schools in Wisconsin that have access to an adjacent school forest or some other nearby nature space, and make efforts to get children outside, the idea of fully immersing young children in nature by having them learn outside all day, every day, while their peers on the same site learn inside a school building, hasn't yet arrived in Wisconsin.

It has, however, come to other states like Tennessee.

Jean Lomino, a retired longtime classroom teacher and former nature center director founded Wauhatchie School, the first forest school in the state of Tennessee, in 2015. That year, 12 children were enrolled. Now, it has expanded to four locations with about 200 children enrolled.

Lomino has since gone even a step further, founding the Forest School Teacher Institute in Tennessee. It has since trained more than 400 forest school teachers in 28



Karyn Saemann

Teacher Amy Johnson and a young student build an outdoor fire in February, during Evergreen Forest School at Hoard Curtis Scout Camp near Cambridge.

U.S. states and four other countries, and has trained directors seeking to launch new programs. Initially, that training was all in person, pivoted to virtual in the pandemic, and remains in that mode for now.

"As a classroom teacher I'd take my kids outside all the time. I knew intuitively that the best way for children to learn was to get them outside as much as possible," Lomino recalls.

One of Lomino's first director trainees was the principal of an elementary school in Chattanooga, Tennessee, that in 2015 became the first public school in that state to launch an outdoor immersion program for its kindergartners. Now, seven years later, that has expanded for children through third-grade.

The idea of educating children outside "is not new. This is as old as people have been on earth," Lomino said. "Children have always thrived in nature. It's only in more recent centuries that we have put them inside buildings, inside classrooms, and tied them to technology."

That, she said, has resulted in statistics that show only about 40 percent of U.S. children now spend at least an hour a day outside.

That's harming children physically, including their vision, she said.

"There's a lot of myopia now, because they are so focused close-up, on a screen," she said. "They don't exercise their eyes like they would outside."

"The physical benefits in getting children outside are a no-brainer," she continued. "In order to be strong, and have strong immunity, they absolutely must have access to what nature has to offer."

"It's also doing social and emotional harm, and the pandemic has just exacerbated that," Lomino continued. "I think that's why we're seeing this explosion of forest schools across the world," especially in countries like South Korea, where the government stepped in and funded teacher training and facilities, with up to 10,000 outdoor immersion forest schools now operating there.

"COVID opened it up," Lomino said. "Before that, it was growing gradually but then it just exploded."

The U.S. "is kind of at the tail end, unfortunately," she said, giving a charge to lawmakers.

"In the U.S., there needs to be some kind of funding kicked in by our government. Our children need this," she said.

Evergreen Forest School

Johnson was teaching second-grade in Watertown when she decided in 2021 to take a year's leave of absence. The COVID-19 pandemic was raging and "had been really stressful," she said.

Prior to working in Watertown, Johnson



Karyn Saemann

Teacher Amy Johnson, children and an aide walk a trail in February during Evergreen Forest School at Hoard Curtis Scout Camp near Cambridge.



Karyn Saemann

A child rings an outdoor bell during Evergreen Forest School, that's been meeting this winter at Hoard Curtis Scout Camp near Cambridge.

taught in Sun Prairie, and had been a classroom teacher since 1999.

She still lives in Watertown.

"I'd always tried to bring nature into the classroom, and to get kids outside on field trips," she recalls. "We'd hatch chicks."

But she always also saw the limitations imposed by what public school has become.

"I saw kids in the classroom; their anxiety levels are so high. It's heartbreaking. We're taking away more and more play from their day, and that's coming back to bite us in very big ways, in the behaviors we're seeing," Johnson said.

"We're pushing kids to read and write and to do things they might not be developmentally ready for," she added.

She had heard about forest schools and said she's "always loved the outdoors."

"I did some research," she said, and learned more about the concept in northern Europe.

What she found appealed, including its child-directed focus.

Teachers facilitate learning based on what children choose to explore in their natural setting on any given day, looking for opportunities as they arise to pull in math, reading and other concepts without a formal lesson plan.

"For me personally, I feel that kids need to have a choice and a voice, that's really how they learn and grow," Johnson said. "It's

finding out where their interests lie. They're still learning, but it's very much on their terms."

Last fall, for instance, her class spent several months exploring whittling.

Her program currently serves 4 to 12-year-olds, all ages mixed together. Children can attend for half or full days.

Age-group mixing, she said, "has been really great. The older ones become such leaders, they just do that naturally. And they have the opportunity, as well, to go off on their own."

Johnson set up Evergreen Forest School as an LLC business, but is now working to add a non-profit arm to be able to tap into grants and other funding.

She said one of her goals is to be able to offer a sliding scale for families of lower incomes. "I don't want price to be a determining factor," she said.

She said Hoard Curtis is allowing her use of its space on a trial basis through April "to see if it works for us, and if it works for them."

She said she's hopeful that she'll be able to stay, fitting around scout camps and other camps scheduled at Hoard Curtis throughout the year.

The past year has been "life altering," Johnson said.

"I've been so happy this year and so happy for the families that have taken the leap with me," she said.

She now has 13 regularly enrolled families, and more trying the school out by attending pop-up sessions she schedules during days off from school, like spring break.

"It just keeps growing, which is awesome," she said.

Tiny Green Trees

Like Johnson, Wiesmueller worked in a traditional setting, at day-care centers in the Milwaukee area.

Then, three years ago, she saw a job posting from Tiny Green Trees founders Jeremy Belot and Kelly Aubin Belot.

"I liked how they spoke about the natural environment and the eco-friendly side of things," she recalls. "That really caught my attention."

"I've always had an interest in being outside with kids, in the nature component," she said.

The Belots' philosophy, she said, aligned with that.

"It's not just playing outside, but being outside, interacting with outside, throughout the day, in rainy weather, in the mud, and that being accepted and encouraged," she said.

Being at the forefront of the forest school movement in Wisconsin has "been really fun," Wiesmueller continued. "I feel like I came in at the perfect time, when it was really starting to kick in here. That's really helping us solidify what we do here with the children, and how we can continue to replicate that and teach others about it."

Tiny Green Trees adheres to the outdoor immersion idea for even its tiniest children, daily taking even infants to nearby county parks. It also has its own backyard play space.

Forest school is also about allowing reasonable risk in play, letting children climb trees freely, for instance, and play with sticks, Wiesmueller said.

"It's letting kids figure out what their bodies can handle and testing their own boundaries. It's still supervised by teachers, there are no children getting injured. But it's not like helicopter parenting," she said. "A stick can be used purposefully, for whatever is in a child's imagination."

Lomino agreed that outdoors is completely safe, in fact often safer than other school settings.

"There is research out there that shows children are safer in a forest setting than on a constructed playground; there are fewer injuries," Lomino noted.

Wiesmueller also said there's ample research to show that during outdoor play, children use more of their senses and that gross motor skill development benefits.

Shifting mindset

"In the U.S., we don't currently have a governing

organization that tells us how we have to create a forest school. We have the freedom right now to make it fit the needs of our community, our children, based on what our particular vision is," she said.

There's hope for more regulation that better addresses what forest school is. Lomino said she hopes Wauhatchie school won't remain a "homeschool tutorial," in Tennessee, meaning children are officially there for enrichment while being schooled at home, forever.

"That is the route that families are going, because we just don't have any other category that we fit into," Lomino said.

She said it's encouraging to see some states initiating licensing for outdoor preschools, and said she hopes that spreads "because we all want that. We don't want to feel like we have to fit into something that's already out there."

Change "is coming," Wiesmueller predicted. "I think we're going to start seeing more about it, in terms of defining it, and regulating it."

Equity

Lomino acknowledged that this is an equity gap, with most of the programs Forest School Teacher Institutes helps set up privately run, with children from families that have financial resources.

There are exceptions, she noted.

About 30 percent of the programs her institute has helped set up are in public schools, she said.

The elementary school in Chattanooga that the institute worked with in 2015, that has since grown its program to include children through third-grade, is public and has a high number of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

"If we think back to our childhoods, the memories that live within us, a lot of it has to do with being outside. I remember playing outside in the rain," Wiesmueller said. "We want to bring that back for future generations of children," and expand access to all children, not just those whose families have the resources to enroll them in a private program.

"We're looking at how we can incorporate this into our school systems," she said. Across the U.S., "there are states that don't even have requirements for recess right now," she added.

Lomino also said there's a growing movement to bring the forest school concept into urban areas, taking children into whatever natural space is available, even if it's small.

"You don't have to have a forest, you just need a patch of nature, a little pocket of land," she said. "There are things that can be done to create that space, even in the middle of a city. In a high-rise apartment building, it can be a deck with some plants."

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