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County Commission Adopts Solar Energy Amendment

Thomasville, Georgia, 11 April 2017 --- The Thomas County Board of Commissioners adopted an amendment to the Land Use Standards Ordinance that will regulate the location and construction of solar energy systems and facilities in unincorporated Thomas County. The amendment will take effect when the solar energy moratorium expires on May 8 unless lifted earlier by the Board. Copies of the approved amendment are available for public inspection on the county's website www.thomascountyboc.org.

The Board held a public hearing on **23 March 2017** to hear comment on the proposed amendment. The public hearing was followed up by a work session on **4 April** where Commissioners considered changes to the proposed amendment based on comments received. During the work session, Commissioners agreed to reduce setbacks for solar facilities to 100 feet from all property lines. The 500 foot setbacks from habitable residences and residential land use districts were left in place. Solar facilities of more than 200 acres were reclassified and limited to commercial general and industrial land use districts. In addition, solar facilities of 200 acres or less will be considered in agricultural districts as a conditional use. Conditional uses are permitted following a duly advertised public hearing.

The Board also added a provision that requires applicants for solar facilities to provide a performance guarantee in the form of a bond, irrevocable letter of credit or other financial security acceptable to Thomas County in the amount of 125% of the estimated decommissioning cost, minus the salvageable value, or \$50,000, whichever is greater. The useful life of a solar panel is estimated at 20 to 30 years. Dismantling and disposing of salvaged solar panels can be expensive given the possible presence of hazardous materials.

The main intent of the ordinance amendment is to preserve our quality of life by regulating the location of solar facilities, commonly known as solar farms, in the rural areas of Thomas County. The amendment sets two categories:

1. **Solar systems** are installations to homes and businesses for the primary purpose of providing power to the property owner. Solar systems will be considered an accessory land use subject to the land use standards currently in place. The amendment will also require inspection of solar systems for safety concerns and to ensure compliance with industry standards.
2. **Solar facilities**, commonly known as solar farms, are constructed for the purpose of providing power for sale to utility companies. Solar facilities of more than 200 acres are a commercial venture and will be permitted in commercial general and industrial land use districts. Solar facilities of 200 acres or less will be classed as a conditional use in agricultural districts and subject to approval on a case by case basis by the County Commission. Solar facilities will not be permitted in residential land use districts.

Commenting on the amendment, Commission Chairman Ken Hickey states, "We have primarily two objectives: 1) to protect the interests of residential and agricultural property owners and 2) to set up an orderly process for citizens wanting to take advantage of solar power".