

# Regional effort to establish York drone facility hinges on potential solar farm



Members of the Eastern Virginia Regional Industrial Facilities Authority discuss their goals for a drone testing facility in York County. (Josh Reyes / Staff)

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**T**he idea to turn an out-of-use fuel farm in York County into a facility for unmanned systems developers to test their drones is on its last wings, but officials are optimistic that the concept will pan out.

It hinges on New Jersey-based KDC Solar paying to help eight Peninsula-area localities take over the property before the state's deadline of Dec. 31.

If all the pieces come together, land off Penniman Road and near the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station eventually could be home to a 20-megawatt solar farm and a drone testing facility.

While the facility and solar farm would be located in York County, the idea and effort behind it has been regional.

Newport News, Hampton, Poquoson and Williamsburg along with York, James City and Gloucester counties came together to find a collaborative project that could qualify for grant funds from Go Virginia, a state program that supports regional cooperation to create high-paying jobs.

In 2017, they decided to pursue funding for a drone facility on the fuel farm site, an approved **Federal Aviation Administration** fly zone. The application did not yield full financial support from the state for that idea, but it did garner a \$150,000 grant to create the Eastern Virginia Regional Industrial Facilities Authority, or RIFA. As part of the grant award, the localities collectively matched that \$150,000.

On Tuesday, the RIFA's Board of Directors, a body made up of various officials from the member localities, voted to authorize KDC Solar to access the property to facilitate the company's acquisition of it.

Jim Noel, York County's director of economic development, said the company will look at the site to see what it can develop on it, adding that there are some natural features to work around, but nothing he expects to derail the acquisition.

The plan is for KDC Solar to fund the \$1.3 million necessary for the RIFA to take over 432 acres from the state and enact a 37-year lease to use about 150 acres in the property for a solar farm, Noel said.

Noel said the company is committed to this plan, but it will be a challenge to do all the work necessary by the end of the year, a deadline for the deal laid out in the state budget. If that doesn't happen, the drone facility won't pan out, Noel said.

"There's no guarantee, but I'm optimistic," he said.

Noel said local drone development companies spurred the localities to pursue a testing site. It's a growing industry in the area, but developers have told the Daily Press they lack the space to test their work.

Noel said the vision is to provide a convenient place to test drones by air, land and water, hopefully encouraging some of those companies to develop on the property and relocate operations there. Officials also envisioned creating a recreational area in the park for hobbyists to use.

The drone facility idea was the one that initially brought the RIFA together and is the only project on its plate.

Sheila Noll, a member of the York County Board of Supervisors, said it was important for the body to be thinking of other projects.

"We all want this to work out, but we don't want to be starting over completely if it doesn't," she said.

Noel agreed and said any other ideas the RIFA pursues would go through the Go Virginia process.

## RIFA expanding

At Tuesday's meeting, the board voted to allow Isle of Wight to join the authority. Steven Meade — an attorney with Patten, Wornom, Hatten and Diamonstein — said Chesapeake also has expressed interest in joining the authority and has a possible idea for development.

Through the RIFA, member localities would be able to choose when to invest in regional development. The structure gives localities that are nearly built out, such as Newport News and Hampton, opportunity to share the costs and revenues of development in localities with more land, such as York and James City counties.

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