

Lamont's Proposed Solar Panel Farm

Dr. William Menke, Palisades Community Center, February 8, 2015

While I am one of the senior professors at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, I want you to understand that I am here today only as a private citizen, or maybe as a self-appointed representative of Mother Nature. From what Carol Baxter told me, the Lamont Director declined an invitation to speak with you today, saying that doing so was premature. I respect that; I do not speak for Lamont.

I learned my science at M.I.T. and Columbia University, but my long association with the people of Palisades has taught me equally important things. I especially credit Ernie Quick and Christina Biaggi, my friends for nearly forty years, for showing me the importance of cultivating an appreciation of beauty, and Laurie Ferguson for helping me to further develop my commitment to humanistic values and a spiritual approach to life.

In a nutshell, Lamont is considering a proposal to lease a six acre section of woodlands, located on the periphery of its campus, to an electric utility. This company would clear-cut the trees and build and operate in their place a solar-electric generation facility (solar panel farm). I'm afraid that I don't understand the rationale behind the plan. Up to few days ago, I would have said it's about reducing our carbon-footprint and thus to forestall Global Warming. If so, the proposal is misguided. As I argue in an Open Letter that I've been circulating and which you are welcome to read, it won't do that. But Friday I finally tracked down a scientist at Lamont who *didn't* strongly oppose the plan. He represented himself as being well-informed on its

development. When I asked him what part of my Open Letter that he found less than compelling, he said that my science was fine, that this was really just about money, about Lamont finding an angle that would enable it to reduce its electric bill, which has grown to \$1.3 million per year. So I don't know ...

Be that as it may, I want to be clear that we Lamont scientists really are the best in the world and that the vast majority of us believe that Global Warming is a growing problem that will cause great hardship and that immediate and substantial actions need to be taken to forestall it. Many of my colleagues are deeply conflicted between the need to preserve ecological habitat and natural beauty in particular parts of the world, and the need to take actions that will preserve the world, as a whole. Lamont scientists have a range of opinions on how devastating the effects of Global Warming will be. One brilliant young climatologist believes that it's already too late to do anything and that all life on earth is doomed. But a more common opinion – and one that I share – is that the world will slowly change over a period of a few hundred years in undesirable ways that, while survivable, will cause substantial human suffering.

I want to take a moment to reflect on an episode of *House M.D.* called "Under my skin". In it, a young woman awakens from an operation that has saved her life but has caused the blood circulation to her extremities to fail. She is told by her doctors that they must amputate her hands and feet, else she will die of gangrene. She is anguished, because her artistic career as a dancer would be over.

A difference between the scenario presented in this fictional television show and Lamont's proposal is that Lamont is not really agonizing over

a decision to cutting of its own hands and feet to save its own life, but rather Mother Nature's hands and feet. Personally, I'm always skeptical when someone implies that "great sacrifices are necessary" but that those sacrifices all turn out to be someone else's. I asked the scientist I mention previously why the solar panels couldn't be put on the roofs of the buildings. He rattled off a reason for each building, each plausible enough in its own way, but in aggregate not terribly convincing – the sort of list of excuses you make when you're just don't want to bother.

My opinion is that the area in which we live is an extraordinary one with natural and historical attributes on par with the most famous of America's national parks. The strip of forested land along the Hudson River and including the Hudson Palisades, on whose rock the foundations of the hamlet of Palisades rest, is an environmental treasure. Its physiography and biota inspired the great painters of the Hudson River School and generations of writers including Cooper, Irving and Anderson. Its proximity to a major metropolitan area gives it a role in habitat preservation more important than some of our remoter parks. These woodlands lack bison and elk, but I have personally observed in them a great diversity of plants and animals. Yesterday, for instance, I sighted a Bald Eagle, flying above the trees. My opinion is that Lamont's proposal will significantly damage part of this area. The valley – currently about as pristine as you can get in the New York City area - that the map calls Skunk Hollow and through which the stream that flows over Peanut Leap Fall is especially at risk.

I don't know enough about the solar project to be able to say much more, except Lamont expects to make a preliminary decision by the end of March. I think that you are right to be asking questions and right also to demand that you be consulted early on in the decision making

process. I know how much the people of Palisades love their community and degree to which we all want to preserve its special character, including its history and natural beauty. However, I would urge you to proceed in a way that builds bridges between community leaders and the Lamont administration, as contrasted to fostering alienation. If you think back, you will recall we have worked together over the years to achieve mutual goals. Our successful effort in 1993 to block the railway tunnel that would have consumed part of Oak Tree Road and caused excessive vibration at Lamont is a memorable example. Also keep in mind that preserving habitat in the Palisades area is essential, irrespective of who owns it. I will be just as ready to oppose a plan, say, to put a solar farm in the Palisades Triangle as I am to oppose this one.

Returning for a moment to *House M.D.*, I would mention that the young woman decided not to undergo amputation, and that Dr. House's brilliant protégés succeeded in saving her nonetheless, by some quick out-of-the-box thinking. It's only a TV-land story, but I'd like to think that that's what will happen here, too, not only for us, locally, but for the earth as a whole.

Thank you for listening to me. Mother Nature and I wish you well.