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Article by Jack McDonough

A Virginia company, Hillman Energy Center, wants to create what it calls a storage “farm” of lithium-ion batteries near my home and the homes of hundreds of other Tewksbury residents.

The objective, they say, is to store energy from the electric grid so that it can be deployed during times of high need. That sounds reasonable.

Except that the company never mentions the potential danger involved for those who live within half a mile of the site. Similar installations elsewhere have caught fire and burned for as long as three days, generating smoke and toxic gases as far as prevailing winds will carry them.

Conventional firefighting methods are usually unsuccessful and the fire must be left to burn itself out.

We’re not talking AAA or C batteries here. The ones they want to plant in an area off Old Boston Road are each 19.9 feet long, 8 feet wide and 9.5 feet tall. Each one would weigh 93,700 pounds and there would be 169 of them.

My desk calculator says that’s 15,835,300 pounds. (Yes. The 15 means “million.”)

I don’t know what kind of safety measures Hillman would use but I don’t want 16 million pounds of lithium-ion batteries accidentally catching fire in my neighborhood.

The immediate neighborhood, by the way, includes small businesses, many private homes, a condo community of some 260 residents, an assisted living facility with some 100 residents and a staff of 30, and seven multi-story apartment buildings.

In some instances elsewhere, the smoke and gases from these conflagrations have forced the evacuation of hundreds of residents. In Tewksbury, the evacuation of the assisted living facility alone would pose a virtually impossible problem for firefighters and ambulance personnel – especially given the scarcity of roadway escape routes.

Some may consider huge battery storage farms like the one proposed here a reasonable plan for the future of this country’s electric system. That’s all well and good. But these sites don’t belong in the midst of homes and businesses.

The town of Tewksbury and the state of Massachusetts should say NO to Hillman Energy.