

Norwich PC Solar Siting Subcommittee October 17, 2023 Minutes

Members present: Ciccotelli, Clement, Laaspere

Public participating: Alec Orenstein [DRB], Craig Layne [NCC, until 7:00], Kathleen Shepherd

Meeting started at 6:35

1. Approved Agenda
2. Public comment for items not on the agenda - none
3. Correspondence – packet materials related to the agenda item on ridgeline and scenic. No other correspondence was received.

4. Scenic Resources and Ridgeline Protection

The discussion explored solar siting topics as they interacted with current regulations relating to ridgeline protection and scenic resources.

Laaspere reported on information from Peter Gregory at TRORC that very few towns in our area have specific ridgeline and scenic zoning regulations. Pomfret and Woodstock have ridgeline regulations which were put in place many years ago. Several towns have discussed creating scenic regulations, but these have not been implemented.

To discuss or adjudicate specific cases relating to ridgelines and scenic resources, it is critical to know exact physical boundaries and have practical tools for the public and the DRB. Clement asked specifically for high resolution maps which included parcel boundaries as well as the boundaries of the various zoning overlays like ridgelines. Laaspere will continue the effort underway at the PC to locate and upgrade the format of the town planning and zoning maps.

We discussed the definition of a ridgeline area, noting that the visual dimensions mentioned specifically in our current regulations relating to forest cover, visual difference from surroundings, glare, etc. are only a subset of what is important about a ridgeline. Other key dimensions include contiguous forest blocks, erosion control, and climate resiliency.

There is a clear relationship between scenic resources and ridgelines, since both relate to views and what can be seen from where. Our listed scenic resources are primarily public roads. These are identified as important because of what can be seen from these roads. The ridgelines are regulated for their visual impact primarily as seen from public roads.

Several areas needing clarification and better definition were discussed. For example, in our current bylaws the terms “structure” and “development” are not completely defined. These definitions are important as they relate to solar installations such as ground mounted structures. For example, does cutting trees qualify as development? Are ground mounted PV arrays structures?

The topic of solar siting was combined with ridgelines and scenic resources for a fruitful discussion exploring various examples. Orenstein from the DRB provided feedback on the ability to review a recent ridgeline proposal using the current regulations. In his view, it was relatively straightforward to go down the list and make sure the proposal was in compliance. We discussed whether there would be any change in this review if such a proposal had included a ground mount solar component.

There is clearly a subjective component to evaluating the visual impact of scenic resources and solar installations. Even the Quechee test brings up the judgment of “the sensibilities of an average person.” Are solar installations visually positive, negative, or neutral?

State regulations provide an important context to any conversation of solar siting. We need to understand the exact constraints on a municipality when regulating solar siting. The next meeting packet will include the details of Vermont law 5.100 which defines categories of net-metering systems and related requirements. Much of our discussion revolved around PV systems under 15 KW.

It was noted that our plan and bylaws must be seen as living documents and updated to include changes in state law and available technology. In 2009 it was warranted to have a section on small wind installations, but with no mention of PV. We need to stay current with both state constraints and new development pressures.

It was agreed that this fruitful discussion was worth continuing, and it will be the main agenda item for the next meeting.

5. Approved minutes of August 24, 2023 & September 19, 2023

Unanimous

Next meeting will be November 14 at 6:30 on Zoom and will continue discussion on the topic of ridgeline and scenic resources as related to solar siting.

6. Adjourned at 8:40

Minutes submitted by Jaan Laaspere
APPROVED 11-14-2023