

Norwich PC Solar Siting Subcommittee & Planning Commission April 30, 2024 Minutes

DRAFT

Subcommittee members present: Ernie Ciccotelli, Mary Gorman, Jaan Laaspere

Public attending: Annette Smith, Kathleen Shepherd, Linda Gray, Joy Kenseth, Mary Albert, Amy Stringer, Jim Antal, Lynnwood Andrews, Zara Reeves, Elizabeth Spencer, Rob Gere, Stephen Gorman, Dan Goulet

Meeting started at 6:35

1. Approved Agenda with adjustment to discuss PUC Upper Loveland first

2. Public comment for items not on the agenda - none

3. Correspondence

email exchange between Laaspere and Kevin Geiger, TRORC
Lamperti / Eanet TRORC letter

4. PUC Upper Loveland Order

A brief discussion of the latest PUC order, which:

“...direct[s] the Applicant to file evidence demonstrating that the Norwich Planning Commission and Norwich Selectboard have considered the Facility as currently proposed and continue to support a determination that the Facility location is a preferred site.”

In the most recent development Norwich Solar has questioned whether any further steps are necessary, and the matter is being reviewed by the PUC. This was an informational discussion since we do not have a specific requirement from the PUC to the PC at this time. An update will be given in the subcommittee portion of the PC meeting on May 14th.

5. Town plan amendment discussion

Annette Smith, Executive Director for Vermonters for a Clean Environment, again participated in the meeting. Her time is appreciated.

Responding to a specific question about the changes to VT Rule 5.100 which took effect on March 1, 2024, Annette explained that the new rules change the timing of preferred siting letters to be required after having received the 45-day notice for the project and look at whether the project is “consistent with applicable policies in their respective plans.” It does not affect Norwich’s default preferred site language specifically.

First, it was emphasized that the edits to the plan being reviewed are a very early start to discussion. Mary G. started the effort proposed at our last meeting to make specific proposals for updating the town plan to be more in line with regulatory needs now in place within state net-metering processes.

We went through the draft edits in detail, making it through to 3-2.h during the discussion.

One important point discussed is the use of our town plan relating state permitting, which differs depending on the type of development. For overall town planning purposes, the plan addresses all types of development and can do so in the more goal oriented, aspirational language of a typical long term planning document. The specific implementation of planning guidance, such as allowable housing density, is addressed in companion documents such as zoning bylaws and subdivision regulations. However, for certain energy planning aspects like renewable energy siting, the town plan is the only document used in the state processes and therefore it must be more specific and regulatory to have practical use to the town.

Planning districts specified in a plan can be useful if allowable development for such districts is well defined. This could include our historic and resource protection districts. Several important VT Supreme Court cases were referenced, and Ernie volunteered to review these and bring back a synopsis to the group.

We talked about ridgelines, scenic views, forest blocks and other valuable areas in town, with attention given to creating a more detailed definition of their value. For example, ridgelines are not just of scenic value, but also protect water quality and discourage development with poor access and on steep slopes. An exercise to carefully define what is valuable to town residents was suggested.

There were comments from public attendees that the town plan edits and discussion seemed biased against solar projects in Norwich. PC Subcommittee members reaffirmed their commitment to a balanced approach to all elements of the town plan, including the need for renewable energy generation. It was acknowledged that, given its topographical and other constraints, Norwich is a difficult town for siting PV projects.

Laaspere reported a brief mapping exploration looking for sites such as parking lots, large roofs, highway medians, etc. He will present a summary at the next meeting. Expanding that same effort and following up on the group's desire to enable solar project siting, all attendees were asked to suggest specific locations and areas most suited to solar projects.

6. Approved minutes of April 16, 2024 - Unanimous

7. Adjourned at 8:40

Our next meeting will be May 21, 2024. Any input for the packet must be submitted by Weds, May 15.

Minutes submitted by Jaan Laaspere