

Norwich PC Solar Siting Subcommittee

June 18, 2024 Minutes

DRAFT

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

Public attending: Mary Albert, Rob Gere, Amy Stringer, Jay Benson, Zara Reeves, Charles Lindner, Dan and Jenn Goulet, Kathleen Shepherd, Linda Gray, Suzanne Leiter

Meeting started at 6:35

1. Approved Agenda

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

3. Correspondence

Public comments related to the proposed plan changes on agenda

4. Town plan amendment discussion

The group reviewed the overall reason and scope of the town plan edits being contemplated.

- Changes required to qualify for an enhanced energy plan
- Limited in scope, rather than a rewrite of the entire town plan
- Increase clarity of language
- Regulatory – make our plan more useful during 5.100 proceedings

We agreed that the summary document was a useful companion to the full annotated town plan. The draft summary was edited, and the new version is appended to these minutes.

We discussed the benefits of a balanced approach to solar siting in the Norwich town plan which would include both constraints and encouragement in different areas of town, with greater specificity replacing the default preferred siting. This could be done using the three-tiered approach discussed in previous meetings with specific areas of town delineated as prohibited, possible with mitigation, or preferred, relative to PV siting.

An important topic was identified as needing more discussion and guidance: in what ways are renewable energy projects, specifically solar, unique compared to other types of development? Clearly, state law treats net metered renewable projects differently, including exempting them from local zoning regulations and substituting the preferred site process. There are specific rules not allowing solar projects to be subjected to unique restrictions compared to other types of development. However, the purpose of planning and zoning is to specify which types of development are allowed in which locations. What are the limits and types of planning guidance that can be used for solar projects?

A few specific topics were discussed in more detail:

- Slopes – what is the right number for solar projects? 15, 25 and 45% were all proposed. We agreed that, whenever possible, it would be desirable to have the plan language match our zoning by-law and subdivision regs.
- Larger solar projects (> 500kW) – the proposed edits say these larger projects are prohibited but there was strong public advocacy in the meeting for leaving it more flexible based on project specifics.
- Forest blocks – should we specify “priority” forest blocks which would refer to a smaller area in town?

We completed initial edits and are ready to present and discuss with the full PC. The subcommittee asks the PC Chair to place this topic on the agenda for the July 9th Planning Commission meeting.

5. Approved minutes of May 28, 2024 - Unanimous

6. Adjourned at 8:05

Our next discussion will be at the July 9, 2024 Planning Commission meeting. We will submit materials containing the draft town plan edits and new version of the summary into the PC meeting packet by 7/3/24. As usual, public comment is welcome.

Minutes submitted by Jaan Laaspere.

To: Norwich Planning Commission
From: PC Solar Siting Subcommittee
Date: June 21, 2024
Re: Summary of Solar Siting subcommittee possible edits of town plan

This memo summarizes changes to the town plan proposed or discussed during the past several months of discussion in the subcommittee. It is meant to be read alongside the edited full town plan document which shows these proposals in context, along with the minutes of the subcommittee meetings detailing the conversations. These ideas are presented to the full Planning Commission for discussion and any necessary decisions.

The overall goal is to make changes that allow our plan to qualify as an enhanced energy plan. This designation will give the town's plan "substantial deference" with the PUC in solar siting projects. This goal requires that we update the energy data and state goals for the town and provide a credible plan for how we will achieve our targets for renewable energy generation.

A related goal is to align our town plan language with the more regulatory use of this document in the state net-metered solar siting process. Since zoning by-laws are not used in these proceedings, the town plan must stand on its own and clearly delineate the town's desires around siting.

PROPOSED PLAN CHANGES

Removal of default preferred solar siting for most of town area

Definitive and specific limitation of PV projects from:

- >15 or >25% slopes [public comment proposes >45%]
- Priority forest blocks
- Ridgeline district
- Riparian areas
- Scenic areas (to be updated => a significant effort)

Explicit creation of specific preferred areas and/or criteria where solar projects are encouraged.

Review of potential glare from solar projects.

Public comment encouraged solar projects to be exempt from certain visual considerations and suggested a specific number of preferred acres to be identified.

Projects over >500kW are not appropriate in Norwich, unless a specific project can be envisioned that does not harm the town's character.

OPEN QUESTIONS

How to treat zoning districts such as commercial / industrial or resource protection in relation to solar siting? These zoning districts are currently not defined based on appropriateness for solar, but more on attributes like topography, natural resources, infrastructure and existing land-use. Other districts could be created to help specify solar siting status, such as create a Renewable Energy district for preferred site areas.

We need to create a defined process to guide review of preferred siting requests for net-metered 5.100 projects.

We will need to update our energy data, including renewable targets and present generation.

Drafted by Jaan Laaspere, Clerk, Solar Siting Subcommittee