

Norwich PC Solar Siting Working Group

November 19, 2024 Minutes

APPROVED 12-17-2025

Subcommittee members present: Mary Gorman, Ernie Ciccotelli, Jaan Laaspere
Steven True, Norwich PD/ZA

Public attending: Mary Albert, Paul Manganiello, Annette Smith, Alice Werbel, Amy Stringer

Meeting started at 7:02

1. Approved Agenda - unanimous

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

3. Correspondence

An email from Peg Merrin was received advocating for the protection of prime ag. soils as part of the solar siting process.

4. Town plan amendment discussion

We discussed a few final points in preparation for submitting proposed town plan edits to the Planning Commission.

Regarding the proposed prohibition of development on slopes above 15%, Laaspere expressed his concern that this could be too restrictive given the broad definition of development. Less restrictive options include adjusting the slope value from 15 to 20 or 25%, adding caveats about possible mitigation, or adjusting the definition of development. Given our desire to stay consistent with other regulations, we prefer to maintain a consistent definition of such an important word. Also, solar projects are not allowed to be singled out from other types of development.

There was discussion regarding the proposed nomenclature of “industrial/energy area” to describe possible solar sites. It was discussed that solar installations, even commercial scale ones, have different infrastructure needs and land use impacts compared to other industries or commercial uses. In our nomenclature and planning we should treat these different uses appropriately.

We also discussed the proposed prohibition on PV projects larger than 500 KW. New state law limits net metering projects starting in 2025 while still pushing for in-state renewable generation. This means we could see proposed projects in Norwich that are larger than 500 KW and, if acceptable sites exist, such projects could make an important contribution toward our renewable generation goals. The mapping exercise described below reviewed possible areas for such projects.

Based on this discussion the Chair will note the points in the edited copy and the topics will be addressed along with other proposed changes in the discussion of the full Planning Commission.

5. Mapping exercise

Laaspere described a very preliminary mapping exercise focused on locating possible areas in Norwich for PV projects, including larger than 500kW; that met certain basic criteria and were 2 – 15 acres.

This exercise was based on an assessment of the new regulatory and commercial environment with the elimination of group net metering in January 2025. Given the new requirement to site net metered systems near loads, it is less likely we will have such systems proposed in the town. However, the state may add new incentives that would make such projects more likely in the future. In either case, a utility or solar developer could propose a commercial scale project larger than 500 KW in Norwich at any time which would go through the Act 248 process.

An important set of terms was clarified. The term “Preferred site” should be reserved for a particular parcel that has been identified for a project and received approval of the Planning Commission and Selectboard. It also includes default preferred sites in the state regs such as brownfields and former gravel pits. For our siting process we will use “Prohibited”, “Constrained” and “Prime” to describe areas of town relative to their solar project potential. This mapping exercise explored possible prime areas for projects larger than 200 KW.

Certain assumptions were made to simplify this preliminary review. Projects of this size must be within 1/2 mile of 3-phase power to be commercially viable. This criterion greatly limits the area to be reviewed. Along with that limitation, state mapped constraints such as prime ag. soils and flood plains were applied along with local town considerations like scenic resources.

This eliminated most of the town’s area while identifying several possible sites. Norwich has 3-phase power only in the village and along Rt 5. Within this limited area, there are two parking lots that could possibly support PV array canopies of 2 – 300kW and along Rt 5 are several former gravel pits of 5 – 15 acres.

This exercise was very preliminary, and the subcommittee will include the information in the Planning Commission discussion. We agreed a possible first step would be preliminary conversations with landowners.

6. Next steps

The Chair will make slight edits to the proposed plan revisions based on tonight’s discussion and submit to the Planning Commission with a request for time on the agenda of the December 10th PC meeting.

7. Approve minutes of October 15, 2024 - Unanimous

Meeting adjourned at 8:10

Our next meeting date will be December 17th at 6:30.
Minutes submitted by Jaan Laaspere.