

**TOWN OF NISKAYUNA
Conservation Advisory Council**

**A G E N D A
April 10, 2024**

7:00 P.M.

HYBRID IN-PERSON (TOWN BOARD ROOM) & VIRTUAL (GOOGLE MEETS)

I. CALL TO ORDER

II. ROLL CALL

III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

1. March 6, 2024

IV. PRIVILEGE OF THE FLOOR

V. ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FORM REFERRALS

VI. DISCUSSION ITEMS

VII. CLIMATE SMART COMMUNITIES TASK FORCE

Awarded Contracts

1. Natural Resource Inventory - Updates
2. GHG Emissions Inventories and Government Climate Action Plan (Jim Yienger attending)

Ongoing Initiatives

3. Climate Smart Communities Task Force
4. Land Preservation Tools
5. Pesticide Outreach
6. Low Mow / Biodiversity Initiatives
7. Quiet Niskayuna
8. Composting Initiative
9. Wildlife Corridors
10. Renewable Energy Expectations

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

**Next Meeting: May 1, 2024
7pm, Town Board Room, Hybrid Format**

TOWN OF NISKAYUNA
CONSERVATION ADVISORY COUNCIL
 Meeting Minutes
 March 6, 2024
 (Virtual) Google Meet

Members Present: Chairman Strayer
 Ellen Daviero (virtual)
 Ashok Ramasubramanian
 Simran Uttukar
 Chuck Piotrowski (virtual)
 Richard Fontero
 Vicki Michela
 Georgia Murray-Bonton (virtual)

Also Present: Laura Robertson, Planner
 Clark Henry (virtual)

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Strayer called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

2. ROLL CALL

Chelsea Rattner was absent/excused.

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

1. January 3, 2024

Chairman Strayer made a motion to approved the January 3, 2024 minutes seconded by Mr. Ramasubramanian, all were in favor with one abstention from Mr. Piotrowski.

2. February 7, 2024

Chairman Strayer made a motion to approve the February 7, 2024 minutes seconded by Ms. Michela, all were in favor.

PRIVILEGE OF THE FLOOR.

Chairman Strayer said hearing and seeing no one in person or online, Privilege of the Floor was closed.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FORM REFERRALS

1. EAF 2023-08: 2690 Balltown Road. GE Vernova-site plan application for a new building

Chairman Strayer said there were a few questions they would like to discuss with Mr. Dumas.

Mr. Dumas, Attorney for GE Vernova said he had Mr. Lilholt, Civil Engineer C.T. Male, and Mr. Platt, Project Manager for GE Vernova, with him to answer any questions he cannot. Mr. Dumas said the first request of them was to have bird safe glass on the new structure. Mr. Dumas said their architect assured him the glass would be tinted and have the appropriate opacity to prevent bird strikes.

Mr. Dumas said as to the solar panels and other initiatives requested, the roof design does not support solar panels and with the technology that is being researched in this building they are not in a position, at this point, of operation for the building to utilize solar panel or other suggested technologies.

Mr. Dumas said another CAC concern was the HVAC noise level. He said the HVAC units will be ground level, not mounted on the roof, and with the building being situated at a lower grading. This creates a natural berm area for sound attenuation, so noise will not be an issue.

43 Mr. Dumas said a tree inventory was done resulting in marking 19 trees ten inches in diameter or larger that
44 need to be removed for construction. Mr. Dumas said he can commit to a one-to-one replacement of the
45 trees and suggested planting them in the back of the building because the front landscaping was full.

46 Mr. Dumas said there was a concern about the function of the existing stormwater facilities at the site. He
47 said he is happy to report that there is no evidence of any malfunction of the existing storm water facilities.

48 Mr. Dumas stated there was a question of an old shed along the bike path with reference to it needed
49 repairs, but in fact the shed belongs to the Town not GE so he suggested reaching out to the Town on this
50 issue.

51 Another item Mr. Dumas addressed was the visibility of the new building from the bike path. Mr. Dumas
52 said the present building is ten feet taller than the proposed new building and is barely visible from the bike
53 path. He presented pictures from the bike path illustrating the existing visibility from various viewpoints to
54 verify his statement.

55 Mr. Dumas also stated there have been no requests for incentives or government funding for this project.

56 Ms. Michela said she was asking about whether or not this project took advantage of tax rebates and
57 incentives through NYCERTA and through New York State through the Inflation Reduction Act for
58 renewable energy. She clarified that she wasn't asking about if GE was receiving government funding for
59 the project but if they looked at rebates for using renewable energy. Mr. Dumas stated they did not have the
60 time on this project to apply for that type of rebates but future development at the site may take that into
61 account.

62 Mr. Dumas spoke about the conservation initiatives and meeting request that was brought up a few months
63 ago by Mr. Ramasubramanian. He said he is pleased to say that this was brought up in a meeting a week or
64 so ago with GE and he feels that three or four people from the Town along with a few people from both
65 companies can discuss the initiatives and future plans for the properties. Mr. Dumas said he would like to
66 schedule a meeting after the spin-off that Vernova is going through. He said possibly later in the second
67 quarter, where there could be a team's meeting with an agenda and a launch for people to introduce one
68 another and to begin discussing some of the initiatives and some of the plans that the companies have for
69 down the road for the properties.

70 Ms. Murray-Bonton said she was the one who mentioned the river banks and wildlife in the area and she is
71 glad the companies are embracing the dialogue. She said to clarify her concerns, she wasn't concerned
72 about the bioretention area in terms of storm water drainage, she wanted to ensure the bioretention area was
73 planted / assessed as to whether its biodiversity could serve as a natural path and corridor for the deer and
74 other wildlife. She felt they would be attracted to the native plantings that were proposed to be put in. She
75 felt the proposal could help draw in some of the grazing animals into the biodiversity area and then down to
76 the river, which might help control some of the migration of deer through the Town.

77 Mr. Ramasubramanian said he read GE's sustainability report on biodiversity and he hopes that the same
78 health and preservation of biodiversity can be done on the Niskayuna campus as on their Ohio and Italy
79 campuses.

80 Mr. Dumas said the new building is state of the art technology to help mitigate climate change issues.

81 Ms. Robertson said Niskayuna adopted a higher energy code which is called the New York State stretch
82 code. She said if the building is state of the art, it might already meet the stretch code but they might want
83 to go back to their architects and make sure they know that the Town of Niskayuna has the stretch code
84 adopted. Mr. Dumas said he would do that.

85 Ms. Daviero said if GE can't do solar she requested that they plant more trees, lots more trees.

86 Ms. Michela asked about the technology funding listed in the packet. Mr. Dumas said it was not referring to
87 funding for the construction of the building but rather to assist with other projects out of the area. There is
88 funding for some of the science through the University of Illinois, some research in Colorado has ties to the

- 89 university there and GE Vernova will be taking the lead in a pilot study project in Houston. Mr. Dumas
90 said the grant funding provided by the Department of Energy was to enable the participation of the
91 company in these programs, not to build the building.
- 92 Chairman Strayer clarified they are not receiving any grants for the capital cost of the building. Any grants
93 would be focused on technology and not the infrastructure. Mr. Dumas said that is correct.
- 94 Ms. Robertson said she needs to mention that previously there was 250 of a single perennial species
95 proposed and GE has diversified their perennials to include a vast amount of additional native species with
96 diverse bloom periods and flowering structures. She said she is very happy to see butterfly weed and
97 nodding onion on the list because these are great for pollinators.
- 98 Mr. Ramasubramanian said the CAC generally asks new properties or new construction to go pesticide free.
99 Mr. Ramasubramanian asked if GE would be willing to adopt strictly natural practices and sign up with the
100 Town's pesticide free pledge. Chairman Strayer said this might be a bigger issue than this particular project.
- 101 Mr. Ramasubramanian asked about the use of pesticide listed in the packet. Mr. Platt said they do not use
102 the pesticide mentioned on the plans – that they remove unwanted vegetation by pulling it out. Mr. Lilholt
103 said the concerning note in question was a standard note for their plans set and he will revise the note for
104 the final plan to remove any references to pesticides.
- 105 Ms. Murray-Bonton asked if Juniper and Crab Apple could be added to the plantings to help the deer
106 migrate north. Mr. Lilholt said he can discuss that with the landscape architect and he doesn't think it
107 should be a problem. The final planting plan would be approved by the Niskayuna Tree Council.
- 108 Chairman Strayer asked if there were any further comments. Hearing none, he asked Ms. Robertson to read
109 the EAF questions.
- 110 Ms. Robertson read the following:
- 111 1. Will the proposed action create a material conflict with an adopted land use plan or zoning
112 regulations?
113 No to small impact. The Height variance will go to the ZBA but the Comp Plan generally
114 encourages continued research and development in the I-R Zone.
 - 115 2. Will the proposed action result in a change in the use or intensity of use of land?
116 No to small impact. The parcel is large and there is not a lot of traffic. Small number of new
117 employees.
 - 118 3. Will the proposed action impair the character or quality of the existing community?
119 No to small impact. The visual impact to the area from the information presented is fairly minimal
120 and the view from the bike path is small. The project is far from the road and far from residential
121 homes.
 - 122 4. Will the proposed action have an impact on the environmental characteristics that caused the
123 establishment of a Critical Environmental Area (CEA)?
124 No to small impact. There is no CEA in the area.
 - 125 5. Will the proposed action result in an adverse change in the existing level of traffic or affect
126 existing infrastructure for mass transit, biking or walkway?
127 No to small impact. Limited view of building from the bike path.
 - 128 6. Will the proposed action cause an increase in the use of energy and/or does it fail to incorporate
129 reasonably available energy conservation or renewable energy opportunities?
130 No to small impact. Ms. Robertson noted that the CAC would like to see GE incorporate as much
131 renewable energy and energy conservation into this building as possible, and wanted to see more.

132 It is important for the CAC to work with the applicant on ideas for conservation and renewable
133 energy through the proposed working group with GE. The building can also look at load
134 optimization and the building will be required to meet the NYS stretch code.

135 Mr. Piotrowski asked how the CAC can be assured that GE will follow the stretch code.

136 Chairman Strayer said he can speak on this, he said energy efficiency has gotten bigger and more in the
137 spotlight now more than it was in the past. He said the committee has reviewed projects in a way that they
138 meet New York State and Town code as far as what our requirements are, in this case it would be the
139 stretch code. Chairperson Strayer said they have no indication that GE would not follow the code. He said
140 he has been involved with multiple projects with GE and they have always lived up to their word and
141 followed the code.

142 Ms. Robertson said the stretch code is a building code and is a requirement when anybody within the Town
143 of Niskayuna submits a new building or a substantial addition to a new building. She said GE can't break
144 ground without a building permit and GE can't get a building permit without meeting the stretch code. She
145 said there are some grayer areas in the code with trees and other requirements but the stretch code is an
146 extremely black and white requirement.

147 Ms. Robertson said this committee has been asking more and more about renewable energy but she wants to
148 make sure that this committee is treating each applicant equally and fairly.

149 Chairman Strayer said to add a note in this section to discuss this at the meeting with GE.

150 7. Will the proposed action impact existing: (a) public/private water supplies? (b) public/private
151 wastewater treatment utilities?

152 No

153 8. Will the proposed action impair the character or quality of important historic, archeological,
154 architectural or aesthetic resources?

155 No to small impact. It is important to minimize the impact to the viewscape from the public bike
156 path but with the plantings and things that are proposed, the new development could add
157 improvements to the site.

158 9. Will the proposed action result in an adverse change to natural resources (e.g., wetlands,
159 waterbodies, groundwater, air quality, flora and fauna)?

160 No to small impact. GE should review and protect wildlife corridors and movement through their
161 parcel. The CAC requested crab apples and Juniper berry bushes to be added to the trees and
162 proposed perennials to directly support the existing wildlife. They also requested pesticide free
163 maintenance of the lawn and grounds in support of protecting birds and insects and because of the
164 proximity to the Mohawk River. The CAC stated it was important to plant the 1 for 1 tree
165 replacement of the 19 trees identified to be removed.

166 Ms. Robertson said the applicant will review the drawings to make sure the reference to pesticides is
167 removed.

168 10. Will the proposed action result in an increase in the potential for erosion, flooding or drainage
169 problems?

170 No.

171 11. Will the proposed action create a hazard to environmental resources or human health?

172 No. Mr. Ramasubramanian noted the proposed research has the potential to vastly improve human
173 health through the mitigation of Climate Change.

174 Mr. Fontero added overall it is a positive, in general, for the community.

175 Mr. Ramasubramanian proposed a motion. He said this is a good project and GE has been very

176 collaborative and open about meeting with the CAC and creating a small working group to share and
177 discuss ideas to make the property more environmentally friendly, and this is important to Niskayuna as a
178 whole. The building is far removed from the road and the view of it from any public property is limited.
179 Additional plantings will be added to the satisfaction of the Tree Council. He is excited for the start of a
180 long and productive, mutually beneficial dialogue and has no hesitation giving this project a negative
181 declaration. Mr. Fontero seconded the motion.

182 Upon voting, the motion passed 6-2.

183 The initial record heard only one nay from Ms. Michela, who stated she felt GE could do more to
184 incorporate renewables into this plan, but Ms. Daviero clarified that her nay vote was not counted properly
185 during the verbal vote because of technological issues with her phone being muted. She stated that she
186 voted nay for the same reason as Ms. Michela and wanted to see more clean energy included into the new
187 buildings and grounds.

188 Chairman Strayer said the negative declaration recommendation has passed and their recommendation will
189 go on to the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals.

190 **DISCUSSION ITEMS**

191 None.

192 **II. CLIMATE SMART COMMUNITIES TASK FORCE**

193 **Awarded Contracts**

194 1. Natural Resource Inventory

195 Mr. Ramasubramanian said Jim gave a presentation to the Town Board last week and it was well received.
196 He said work will start soon. Mr. Ramasubramanian said he will start to put together a working group this
197 week. Mr. Ramasubramanian said he will work with Simran to go to the High School and get the word out
198 to the science classes. Ms. Uttukar said Mr. Ormsby and Mr. Scott would be great teachers to work with on
199 this.

200 Mr. Ramasubramanian would also like to do an outreach at the Senior Center.

201 Ms. Robertson said Ms. Peretti or Ms. Foti can help with this and there are also three ladies at the Senior
202 Center, Linda, Robin & Eddy, who have been a huge help with the Comprehensive Plan and could likely
203 help with this as well.

204 Mr. Fontero asked what would be needed to help with this. Mr. Ramasubramanian said he will need a few
205 people from the CAC to help him do the heavy lifting on this with him. He said he would be lead but
206 would need help with the meetings possibly and consultant walk dates, making sure there is a crowd of
207 people gathered, there are roughly three dates. He said also making sure the website updates to mention
208 just a few things.

209 Ms. Robertson said she would work on the website.

210 Ms. Murray-Bonton said she can get a lot of people out to walk on the three walk dates. Chairman Strayer
211 said he went on the last NRI walks and it was very amazing. Mr. Ramasubramanian said he would love to
212 get a GE person on the NRI working group.

213 Ms. Robertson said she included the last NRI in the packet but she would like to mention one of the
214 recommendations from the original phase I of the NRI is coming to fruition, Mr. Ramasubramanian and his
215 wife worked really hard to get a trail up by the Senior Center which will be opening or is already open.

216 2. GHG Emissions Inventories and Government Climate Action Plan

217 Ms. Robertson said she is still working out the contract with the contractor. She said she hoped he could
218 attend this meeting but it wasn't possible but he will attend the next meeting. Ms. Robertson said there
219 should be a presentation at the next meeting on the timeline for the Climate Greenhouse Gas Emissions and
220 Government Action Plan.

221 Ms. Robertson said the Town adopted energy benchmarking. The Town puts its energy bills into an online
222 service called the EPA portfolio which allows us to track our energy use over time. This will be useful to
223 calculate greenhouse gas emissions. Ms. Robertson said the Town has the potential to have a net zero
224 wastewater treatment plant. She said just recently they started to accept enough waste to start to generate its
225 own electricity.

226 **Ongoing Initiatives**

227 3. Climate Smart Communities Task Force-Goals and Updates
228 Nothing new to report.

229
230 4. Bethlehem Conservation Easement Program
231 Mr. Ramasubramanian said they modified versions of Bethlehem and other communities' proposals.
232 Chairman Strayer said there are other programs besides Bethlehems and asked if the committee wants to
233 flush them out as well. Chairman Strayer said the Comprehensive Plan Committee is looking at a whole
234 bunch of different items and he feels maybe a discussion where this committee could take all those items
235 and come up with something that is comprehensive and not wait for the Comprehensive Plan to go out.

236 Mr. Ramasubramanian asked to present these ideas to the Town Board. Chairman Strayer said yes. Ms.
237 Robertson clarified that it would be more than just the Bethlehem program it would be a couple other things
238 that they have been looking at.

239 Ms. Robertson said maybe the name should be changed to the Conservation Easement and Land
240 Preservation Tools. Chairman Strayer suggested just Land Preservation Tools.

241 Ms. Michela asked if this included giving the open space property owners a tax break. Ms. Robertson said
242 yes, she believes it does and that is why it would have to be done with the schools because it is a total tax
243 reduction.

244 Mr. Ramasubramanian requested that they set a goal to present options to this committee first by next
245 meeting. Ms. Robertson said she feels that is appropriate because she feels there aren't any big projects
246 right now and they can really spend some time on this.

247 Chairman Strayer said they already have some materials together – it just needs to be packaged for the
248 Town Board. Ms. Robertson said they can put the two documents together and think about how to make a
249 presentation. She said this will help with the Comp Plan too.

250

251 5. Pesticide Outreach

252 Ms. Daviero said not much to report just waiting for the information to come back online.

253

254 6. Low Mow/Biodiversity Initiatives

255

256 7. Quiet Niskayuna

257 Ms. Michela said she had a conversation with the women who started Quiet Communities the Nationwide
258 Program. She said she put her in touch with people that she could get more information from as to how
259 they have dealt with charging and that the electric ones are not as powerful. Ms. Michela said she would
260 like to talk about the rebate for Clean Energy Communities with Ms. Robertson.

261 Chairman Strayer said he thinks information is the key at this point because there are so many
262 misconceptions about electronic lawn care equipment.

263 Ms. Michela said if the CAC wants to encourage it amongst our Town maintenance department, they really
264 need to get specific on how other towns have done it and how it has impacted their ability to clean-up their
265 property.

266 Mr. Piotrowski said he wanted to say that he supports Ms. Michela and her efforts. Mr. Piotrowski said
267 secondarily he wants to mention its not about lawn maintenance it is primarily about noise pollution in his
268 opinion. He said people should be able to do what they want with their yards but it is the constant drone of
269 motors from sun up to sun down from Spring to Fall, that is the problem. He said this is a wonderful thing
270 he just wants to stay focused on the Quiet Communities quiet part he said everything else they do looks at
271 the conservation and environmental impact. He said noise is pollution.

272 Ms. Robertson said she feels if the CAC can get the Town or the County to adopt the technology the others
273 will follow on a government scale. Another idea is very preliminary but other towns are doing it – in which
274 the Quiet Niskayuna Initiative actually moves into regulating the times you can use leaf blowers.

275 8. Composting Initiative

276 Ms. Daviero said they have picked the site, at the Senior Center and it should be up and running for Earth
277 Day.

278 9. Wildlife Corridors

279 No additional updates.

280 10. Renewable Energy Expectations

281 For next month.

282 Ms. Michela asked what it was.

283 Ms. Robertson said it is so they can clearly define what the renewable energy expectations are for each
284 applicant. She wanted to make sure it is on the record so they are applying the same standard to all
285 applicants. Chairman Strayer said it is so they can come to a consensus of what their expectations are as a
286 committee and then go forward with it consistantly.

287 **VIII. ADJOURNMENT**

288 Chairman Strayer made a motion to adjourn the meeting, Ms. Michela seconded. All were in favor. The
289 meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:44 PM.