

Town of Barre  
Planning Commission  
January 20, 2021

The Town of Barre Planning Commission held a meeting on Wednesday, January 20, 2021 beginning at 7:00 p.m. by electronic means, Zoom video conference and teleconference.

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Host Zoom: Chris Violette

Zoom: Mike Gilbar, Cedric Sanborn, Byron Atwood, George Clain, and Deb Pierce

**MEMBERS ABSENT:**

Charles Thygesen, Sr.

**STAFF PRESENT:**

Zoom Host: Chris Violette

Zoom: Cindy Spaulding

**OTHERS PRESENT**

Alex Bravakis (Novus Energy Development) (Zoom) and Beverly Croteau (teleconference)

1) **CHANGES TO THE AGENDA**

Mr. Sanborn called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Mr. Clain asked to move item 6 Old business: Discussion of Beckley and Granview 500kW solar projects (completed) ahead of item 1: Solar Siting. Rescinded the request. No changes to agenda.

2) **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

*On motion by Mr. Gilbar, seconded by Mr. Atwood, the Planning Commission approved the minutes of December 9, 2020 with corrections. Vote 6-0-0.*

3) **SOLAR SITING**

Novus Energy request for preferred siting designation for Bridge and Allen Streets 500kW Solar Projects

**Discuss the two Novus Energy 500kW solar projects off Allen and Bridge Street and consider preferred siting designation. Also discuss any comments to include in future correspondence with the applicant or the Public Utility Commission.**

As you all know we reviewed two solar proposals last month after received the 45-day notices of intent to file an application with the Public Utility Commission. Alex Bravakis of Novus Energy presented both projects. Both Allen Street and Bridge Street are proposed to be 500kW projects. Below is a summary of each:

Project 1 Bridge Street

- 500 kW on 2.6 acres of land on a southerly slope
- Developer feels that visibility is limited so there will less screening/plantings needed
- Land has no agricultural uses according to Mr. Bravakis and Regan Howard and Valerie Vallerand representing Merry Meadow, LLC (owners of the property)

- Solar panels closer together
- Three-phase power will be underground from the power pole back to grid panel at the turnaround on site
- Follow existing access road

Project #2 – Allen Street

- 500 kW on 3.5 acres of land
- Panels will have a visual impact along Allen Street
- Class II -Wetlands
- Approaching HP Hood for net metering or to be used locally
- Visual mitigation with plantings and screening will be done
- Plantings will be evergreens and flowering bushes that are deer resistant
- Decommissioning for both sites: After twenty-five years, the plan is to restore the site to its original condition. Take everything out and recycle all materials that can be recycled. There may be an option after the 25 years, to sign a new lease and put new modules on the site as it already has the infrastructure.
- Regarding erosion etc:
- Mr. Bravakis noted that most civil engineers conclude solar array would not increase the erosion/sediment runoff. More discussion ensued about concerning potential drainage problem, impervious surfaces and types of ground covering to be grass/pollination plantings, permitting process includes a section.

A site visit was conducted on December 21<sup>st</sup>. As far as I know only Cedric was able to attend but I am familiar with the sites. If any other members get a chance to view the sites that might not be a bad idea. The Bridge Street site sits well off the road and down a farm road so it might be a bit hard to get to.

I have yet to receive an official request for preferred location but expect that will be coming or even if we do not get an official request it is expected after last month's review. Preferred siting has 9 options which relate mostly to parking canopy's, brownfields, landfills, gravel pits or quarries, etc. The exceptions is the 7<sup>th</sup> option which states as follows:

*A specific location designated in a duly adopted municipal plan under 24 VSA chapter 117 for the siting of a renewable energy plant or specific type or size of renewable energy plant, provided that the plant meets the siting criteria recommended in the plan for the location; or a specific location that is identified in a joint letter of support from the municipal legislative body and municipal and regional planning commission in the community where the net-metering system will be located.*

Neither our Town nor Energy Plan designates specific locations for the siting of renewable energy so what Novus will be looking for is the highlighted part above. Here, the Selectboard, Planning Commission, and Regional Planning Commission can support a specific site.

Decommissioning was also discussed last month, Mr. Bravakis sent proposed language that I have included it in your packets.

I know there is likely still much discussion to take place and may or may not be concerns. I have spoken to two abutters to the Bridge Street project who have indicated to me issues with regard to what seems like a lack of concern for their views that will look out over at least some of the panels. Mr. Bravakis indicated no screening would be needed here because of the lack of visibility. That probably needs to be reconsidered to help address the abutters concerns.

One abutter, William and Catherine Swift, have concerns about their well in addition to view. Mrs. Swift told me that their well has had issues in the past including when Barre Electric, located across the street, constructed an addition, the vibration ruined their well. They had a new well drilled for them and apparently this well is also impacted by vibrations. The Swifts are concerned that any vibrations resulting from installation of the piers for the solar panels could have a negative effect on them. Mrs. Swift has raised these concerns with Mr. Bravakis.

With consideration to those concerns I personally think we must seriously consider these sites to be preferred. While not invisible (they never are and not expected to be) they are fairly tucked away. With a chance to create 1 megawatt of solar that does not impact prime ag, is naturally screened in many ways, and isn't located out in the open, these are good sites with additional mitigations measure.

The Town Plan supports the following:

- Any new ground mounted solar array should utilize existing topography, development, or vegetation on site to break up the visual mass of the arrays.
- Renewables cannot be sited in predominately visible locations on hillsides or ridgelines and shall be sited to preserve open space.
- With the goal of maintaining the Town's rural character, protecting rural open space and agricultural heritage, removal of productive agricultural lands and green fields for solar development is prohibited.
- In the absence of existing natural vegetation, solar arrays must be screened by native plantings beneficial to wildlife and pollinators that will grow to a sufficient height and depth to provide effective screening within a period of 5 years. These arrays are not permitted in "green fields" (actively used agricultural sites or sites with prime agricultural soils). They shall provide for an orderly development of solar within the Town and be compatible with adjacent property uses and be sited to preserve rural cultural aesthetics.

Mr. Violette provided an overview of his staff report above, outlining Novus Energy's request to obtain preferred site status for the Bridge Street and Allen Street solar array projects. Novus Energy has submitted the same request to the Barre Town Selectboard and the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission.

Discussion ensued regarding the Bridge Street Solar Array location:

- Two abutters (Swift & Croteau) are concerned the project would cause vibrations which could contaminate their wells. One abutter had their well contaminated from a previous project in the area. Novus and their professional civil engineers will work with the abutters and mitigate any issues about their concerns of well contamination before and throughout the process.
- Concerns of stormwater runoff/erosion. It was explained erosion from stormwater usually occurs with new soils have been graded and new seeding or when the grade of the existing ground is runs perpendicular to the racking. The Bridge Street location would not be graded, or fresh soils and the terrain does not run perpendicular to the racking.
- During construction there would be permeable barrier material use to keep sediment from getting into the waterways as preventative measures for stormwater runoff.
- Request for additional screening as the solar array would be visible from the direct abutting (Croteau) neighbor's view from top of the valley. There is loss of visibility to wildlife habitats and winter recreational activities in the field.
- Mitigation plan be part of the process regarding the wells in the Section 248 process. Under Section 248 comments: the abutters should submit a comment with concerns of the wells as part of the permitting process and is public record.
- Beams are 6" H-beam and 6 to 8 feet deep in sandy/loam soils, potentially low vibration
- Decommission Plan would remove all equipment and recycle what can be recycled; and return the land back to its original state. Novus would add a sentence or two that indicating any holes or ditches created would be filled in.
- Equipment failure: solar panels usually do not fail; the inverters are the moving parts of the operation and they would fail.
- Recycle solar panels and other material is difficult at this time in the State of Vermont, legislature is still review how it can implement a recycling program.

Discussion ensued regarding Allen Street Solar Array location

- No comments received or changes been made since the previous month's presentation.

Bridge Street

Discussion amongst all Commission members:

Pros: Bridge Street Solar Array does meet the criteria as a preferred site. There are concerns mentioned (above) that will need to be addressed.

Cons: Sites could be developed for solar; just not to hand out a blanket "preferred site". Need to be more due process.

Further discussion on the process that legislature has given municipalities the authority to review each site on a case by case basis, and how each would impact the community and land; and fit the criteria of the Energy Plan and Town Plan.

*On motion by Mr. Atwood, seconded by Mr. Gilbar, the Planning Commission approved Bridge Street Solar site as a preferred site. Vote 5-0-1 (Clain abstained)*

Allen Street

Discussion:

Pro: The Allen Street Solar Array does meet the criteria. It is visible at different time of year.

Con: Project is 100' off the public roadway and might set precedence if approve. There needs to be visual mitigation: plantings of evergreens, bushes, and/or a wall may help to screen. More detail about what the visual mitigation will be needs presented. Another site visit will try to be scheduled.

*On motion by Mr. Atwood, seconded by Mr. Gilbar, the Planning Commission tabled action to February 17, 2021. Vote 4-2-0.*

Atwood, Clain, Gilbar, Sanborn voted in affirmative: Pierce and Violette voted against. A site visit will be set up to review the proposed project.

#### 4) **ZONING BYLAW DISCUSSION AND AMENDMENT**

Passed over

#### 5) **TOWN PLAN DISCUSSION AND AMENDMENTS**

Passed over

#### 6) **OLD BUSINESS**

Discuss Beckley and Granview 500KW solar projects (complete)

Mr. Clain brought to the Commission's attention that the completed Beckley and Granview 500kW solar projects by Norwich Energy do not match what was presented in 2018. There are concerns that substantial changes were made after the presentation and obtaining a letter of preferred site.

Discussion highlights:

The town/PC were not notified of changes to the placement of the solar arrays as presented in 2018.

Mr. Violette thinks that the Beckley Hill site is built in its original location but agrees with Mr. Clain that Granview is not.

It was suggested moving forward to include a condition in the “preferred site” letter: Preferred site is in accordance to plans presented.

7) **OTHER BUSINESS**

Discuss Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission’s/Efficiency Vermont Energy Usage Report

Discussion ensued that the data in in the recently released “Efficiency Vermont Report” is not accurate for the Town of Barre as it is combined with the City of Barre.

*On motion by Mr. Gilbar, seconded by Mr. Clain, the Commission will draft a letter to CVRPC and State of Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development explaining the data for the Town of Barre in the Efficiency Vermont Report is not accurate. Vote 6-0-0*

8) **FOLLOW UP**

None

9) **ROUND TABLE**

None

10) **DELIBERATIVE SESSION AS NEEDED**

None

11) **ADJOURN!**

*On motion by Mr. Atwood, seconded by Mr. Sanborn, the Planning Commission adjourned at 9:05 p.m. Vote 6-0-0.*

Respectfully submitted,

Cindy Spaulding, Clerk

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Cedric Sanborn, Chair

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George Clain  
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Debra Pierce

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Michael Gilbar  
Chris Violette

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Byron Atwood

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Charles Thygesen, Sr.