

Town of Barre
Planning Commission
February 17, 2021

The Town of Barre Planning Commission held a meeting on Wednesday, February 17, 2021 beginning at 7:00 p.m. by electronic means, Zoom video conference and teleconference. There was no physical meeting place for this meeting under Covid-19 legislative authority.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Host Zoom: Chris Violette

Zoom: Mike Gilbar, Cedrick Sanborn, Bryon Atwood, George Clain and Deb Pierce

MEMBERS ABSENT:

STAFF PRESENT:

Zoom Host: Chris Violette

Zoom: Cindy Spaulding

OTHERS PRESENT

Zoom: Alex Bravakis (Novus Energy Development), Regan Howard and Valerie Vallerand (Merry Meadows, LLC), and Brian Fecher (Websterville Christian Academy)

1) **CHANGES TO THE AGENDA**

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

Mr. Violette asked to add two items to the agenda—update on Mr. Thygesen and a conceptual review by Pastor Brian Fecher of the Websterville Christian Academy.

2) **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

January 20, 2021

On motion by Mr. Clain, seconded by Mr. Gilbar, the Planning Commission approved the minutes of January 20, 2021 as written.

3) **SOLAR SITING**

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

Mr. Violette provided an overview of the site visit of the proposed solar array on Allen Street. Highlight: Flagging was provided to give a visual of where the panels would be located. It was noted that the panels have been pushed further from the road and that the terrain will make most of the panels not visible. A wetland and its buffer made it challenging to offer more screening but by pushing the array further back it allows more screening in front.

Mr. Bravakis provided an overview of visual mitigation:

- moving the project 204 feet from the road,
- making the project slightly smaller,
- shifting the solar arrays back so to add the vegetated plants on the southern end to shield panels.

Mr. Sanborn asked if there were any comments from the public participants. There were none. He then asked if there were any comments from members.

Mr. Gilbar stated he was satisfied with it as it addresses the concerns of the solar array being visible from the road.

Mr. Clain stated that it is taking away from agricultural soils and read the Town Plan goal under Solar:

“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.”

Mr. Clain did ask how it can change from agriculture use to non-agriculture use in one year. Ms. Howard and Ms. Vallerand explained they acquired in the past year and that it is not conducive to their farming style or economically feasible.

Mr. Violette agreed with Ms. Howard and Ms. Vallerand. He further stated it is an opportunity to take small piece of land that was not overly productive to be sacrificed with an opportunity to preserve other agricultural soils in the area.

Mr. Atwood expressed various scenarios for the 3.5 acres of land between housing development, harvesting hay to openness with views.

Ms. Pierce asked what the zoning was in that area. Mr. Violette stated it was low density residential. Ms. Pierce further asked Ms. Howard and Ms. Vallerand how many acres they had in that area and how would they access the field.

Mr. Violette stated it was a good spot instead of out in an open field, potential to create a substantial amount of renewable energy which is not in an open field.

Mr. Sanborn mentioned that it is still visible looking down the hill and went on to mention the growth of the area with a church and house built, which took away from agriculture farming. He would like to see the solar array project pushed back further so it is not as visible.

Ms. Howard mentioned as the farmer she is looking into other methods to take care of shielding the array from the wetlands by planting pollination plants and possibly crabapples.

Ms. Pierce mentioned the reason for asking the questions on how they do their farming on 197 +/- acres of prime agriculture soils and to see how they are supporting their operation with the remaining acreage without the three acres. She further explained how there were traffic issues with two commercial properties on either side of the parcel for the solar array. Solar farm is the best use of the land.

On motion by Mr. Gilbar, seconded Ms. Pierce, the Planning Commission approved Allen Street Solar site as a preferred site based on presented map; any deviation of the project, the Commission would like to review if it would still be a “preferred site”. Vote 5-1-0 (Clain opposed).

4) POTENTIAL CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Mr. Violette announced the Websterville Christian Academy (WCA) is looking at the St. Sylvester Church, owned by the Roman Catholic Diocese on Church Hill Road, to expand its academic school. St. Sylvester

Church is in the industrial zone district. Under the current zoning regulations, Industrial zone district does not allow education. Mr. Violette mentioned it would be an opportunity to rezone by moving the Very High Density Residential (VHDR) up to the church property instead of spot zoning. Discussion ensued concerning the types of zoning and its process.

The consensus of the commission is for the applicant to apply for an allowed use determination for now and then they will look at rezoning the area later.

5) **ZONING BYLAW DISCUSSION AND AMENDMENT**

Planned discussion regarding potential amendments.

Mr. Violette mentioned he is looking into a workable file sharing for the Zoning bylaws that it can be worked on together.

6) **TOWN PLAN DISCUSSION AND AMENDMENTS**

Continuous review of Town Plan and any potential edits or action items

7) **OLD BUSINESS**

Discuss siting discrepancy of the recently completed 500kW Granview Solar project. .

Mr. Violette and Mr. Clain had reviewed the Grandview Solar project not being built at the location as presented for the “preferred site” letter. Norwich Solar Technologies (NST), for whatever reason presented the plan one way during the 45-day timeframe but submitted it differently when they submitted their full application to the Public Utility Commission (PUC). Mr. Violette mention there is a need to pay close attention to the solar projects as they are proposed for the “preferred site” letter and the final application submitted to the PUC. He mentioned he did contact NST with regard with the Grandview Solar array not as it was presented to the PC. The representative of NST did not have a plausible explanation except they were trying to avoid the wetlands. Further discussion as to putting a condition/clause in the “preferred site” letter, that the “preferred site is based upon map presented at the time. Mr. Violette asked if the Planning Commission wants to file a formal complaint with PUC against NST.

Mr. Clain mentioned that he as a private citizen and not a member, has filed a formal complaint filed against NST with the PUC under Rule 5.1.

Highlights:

- Have NST come back to the PC to explain the change in Granview Solar Array
- Application process submitted to PUC
- Substantial Change to project within 50’ should notify all interested parties.
- Future solar array preferred site requests
- Notify the Selectboard that the Planning Commission would like to submit a letter to PUC as an official complaint against Norwich Solar Technologies
- Tabled to March 17th meeting.

8) **OTHER**

Mr. Sanborn provided an update on the status of the letter to Efficiency Vermont. He asked who needed

printed copies of the Town Plan and Zoning Bylaws. An email providing ideas for a transportation study for micro-transit.

9) **FOLLOW UP**

Mr. Violette announced that Mr. Thygesen has submitted a letter of resignation from the DRB and the Planning Commission. Discussion ensued as Mr. Thygesen has been a member for 40 plus years, it is suggested to proposing to the Selectboard to make Mr. Thygesen an honorary member.

10) **ROUND TABLE**

No round table discussion.

11) **DELIBERATIVE SESSION AS NEEDED**

No deliberative session

12) **ADJOURN!**

On motion by Mr. Gilbar, seconded by Mr. Clain, the Planning Commission adjourned at 8:30 p.m. Vote 6-0-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Cindy Spaulding, Clerk

Cedric Sanborn, Chair

George Clain

Debra Pierce

Chris Violette

Mike Gilbar

Bryon Atwood