

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT  
TOWN SELECT BOARD  
ELECTRIC UTILITY COMMISSION  
JOINT PUBLIC HEARING  
Minutes of June 25, 2018**

**ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair Kenneth W. Goslant, Board members David Maxwell, Lynn Doney (absent), Julie H. Goodrich, and Nathaniel Miller. Electric Utility Commissioners Stephen Fitzhugh and Dennis Donahue (absent). Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, T.J. Poor (VPPSA), Ken Nolan (VPPSA), Jesse Stowell (Encore Renewable Energy), Laura Hill-Eubanks (Northfield Conservation Commission & Planning Commission), Russ Barrett (Northfield Conservation Commission), Patrick DeMasi (Utility Superintendent), Gerard LaVarnway, Nancy LaVarnway, Steve Davis, Christine Barnes, Gordon Perkinson, Stephanie Wawrzyniak, Peter Evans, Debra Maloney-Evans, Katrina DeMasi, Colin Bright, Jeanne Bright, Thomas Bright, David Black, Audrey Seaman, Christine Elwell, Nancy Peck, Sue MacMartin, Denise MacMartin, Colleen Kottenbach, Joe Zuaro, Deborah Zuaro, Chris Biss, John Stevens, Carolyn Stevens, Lois Jerome, Pat Stimpson, Jane Pekol, Anne Donahue, Lisa Page, Simon Parish, Christa Wells, and Liz Atems.

The Public Hearing was opened at 7:00 p.m. by Stephen Fitzhugh who serves as Chair of the publicly-elected Electric Utility Commission as well as Northfield's appointed representative to the Vermont Public Power Supply Authority (VPPSA), he said this would be the first of two public hearings held for the purpose of obtaining public views on a proposed solar project on Cheney Farm. Mr. Fitzhugh noted the Town of Northfield is served by three (3) separate electric companies: the publicly-owned Northfield Electric Department (NED); Green Mountain Power (GMP), which is an investor-owned utility; and the Washington Electric Co-op (WEC), which serves co-op members in its service area. He added Northfield residents frequently will see GMP service trucks in town because NED has contracted with GMP to perform various infrastructure maintenance tasks.

Northfield is one of twelve (12) public utility VPPSA members and Mr. Fitzhugh said VPPSA asked its members to suggest possible solar project locations within their own borders. VPPSA assists its member utilities in purchasing power from various sources and in doing so helps them diversify their power portfolios to meet state and federal renewable energy purchase requirements. Mr. Fitzhugh said Northfield's topography makes it challenging to find acceptable sites for large solar farms. After reviewing municipally-owned possibilities, Mr. Fitzhugh recommended the municipal-owned property on Cheney Farm as the most logical site for a feasibility study. Mr. Fitzhugh then provided several reasons why the Cheney Farm site is considered most suitable including: 1. The property is already owned by the Northfield municipality; 2. The site is close to an existing utility substation; 3. The site could provide for a microgrid to provide power to the downtown area, emergency services, and temporary shelters during a natural (or man-made) disaster; 4. The site is an open field so no trees would need to be removed; and 5. The site is generally hidden from neighboring streets and homes. He added developers have made inquiries regarding the site for other purposes in the past. Mr. Fitzhugh said the municipal property on Vermont Route 12A where the Wellfield is located is not considered an appropriate site due to concerns a solar farm (or similar project) could contaminate the groundwater. He added the reservoir located on Cheney Farm is fully enclosed so there aren't such concerns there.

In recent days, Mr. Fitzhugh has heard allegations this project is a "done deal." He said this was not the case as the project is in very early planning stages and the public input sought tonight is part of that process. The project now has investor interest and Mr. Fitzhugh feels it would be a positive development for NED ratepayers. Once the public outreach period has ended and approval to use the municipal property for the project is granted by the Select Board, the next step would be to work with NED ratepayers to determine whether the project should go ahead.

T.J. Poor is VPPSA's Senior Power Supply Analyst and he is present tonight to describe the project process as well as the potential benefits of this project. He said VPPSA was created to provide shared services to Vermont's municipal-owned electric companies. Its twelve (12) members cover six percent (6%) of the state's electric load. Mr. Poor said VPPSA has looked for potential solar projects in Vermont for several years and last year asked its members to suggest possible sites within their own communities. Cheney Farm was the local site suggested and seven (7) potential developers bid on this project. The bidders were asked to investigate and identify other possible sites in Northfield but no other viable site was identified. After evaluating the bids, VPPSA selected Encore Renewable Energy's as the best proposal. Among other factors, this proposal was considered favorable as it would not lead to any increase in NED rates. The preliminary plans indicated the completed solar farm would provide 2,200 MWH per year, which would provide about seven percent (7%) of NED's annual energy needs. It also would allow NED to meet one hundred percent (100%) of its Renewable Energy Standard (RES) Tier II obligations through 2032. If this project is not pursued, there are other options, including that NED might need to purchase renewable energy credits from other Vermont facilities in the future to meet these obligations. Such purchases could put upward pressure on rates and if insufficient credits are available, NED might have to pay an annual Alternative Compliance Payment (ACP) which would cost even more. If paying the ACP is necessary, these annual payments are estimated to be \$50-75,000 in 2020 increasing to over \$100,000 in 2022, and they could increase significantly in the future.

The Public Hearing then was opened to questions from members of the public.

Simon Parish asked why the chart of NED renewable energy resources showed a significant decline in sources after 2020. Mr. Poor said this was when one of NED's current long-term energy purchase agreements would expire. Peter Evans asked if there had been consideration for splitting up the project among many smaller sites. Mr. Poor said splitting the project this way would result in much higher operating expenses and would be much less attractive to potential investors. In response to a question from David Black, Mr. Poor said the Cheney Farm would result in a seventy percent (70%) increase in the generation of renewable electricity from within the borders of the town of Northfield. He added the solar farm on Bull Run is privately owned so the bulk of those renewable energy credits are being sold elsewhere. Carolyn Stevens asked if the NED power source graph included the solar panels now installed on rooftops, etc. Mr. Poor confirmed the graph did incorporate net-metered power sources. Colin Bright asked how the estimated power generation figure was determined. Mr. Poor said this is what Encore Renewable Energy projected in its proposal. Ms. Stevens asked if VPPSA considered Northfield sites other than Cheney Farm. Mr. Poor said the only site proposed by NED representatives to VPPSA was Cheney Hill for the reasons Mr. Fitzhugh provided earlier. Potential developers were encouraged during the bid process to identify other acceptable sites with access to existing power lines, etc. but they did not propose any. Denise MacMartin asked if no alternative sites were proposed. Mr. Poor said alternative sites were found in other VPPSA member communities but not in Northfield.

Jeanne Bright asked what would be the potential hazards to the Wellfield should a solar project be sited there. Mr. Fitzhugh said the various chemicals are used to clean and maintain the solar panels might leach into the groundwater. As indicated earlier, the reservoir on Cheney Farm is fully enclosed so there is no fear of contamination. Audrey Seaman asked if the energy generated could be stored. Mr. Poor said the creation of the aforementioned microgrid would require battery storage and could provide power for emergency services, etc. during a region-wide power outage. He added this has been done in Rutland to provide emergency sheltering in case of natural disaster. Mr. Fitzhugh added the solar panels would have batteries to store power for times when there isn't sufficient sunlight to generate power, i.e. nighttime, cloudy days, etc.

Jane Pekol is concerned if the solar project is completed in the near future, NED might be locked into outdated technology for several years. Mr. Poor said there is the possibility future solar technology might be more efficient and less expensive but that federal tax credits available now that reduce costs to NED are phasing out and there is no guarantee that the project will be more affordable in the future. NED would need to seek to meet its Renewable Energy Standard Obligations elsewhere.

Thomas Bright felt Cheney Farm was a valuable recreation resource and would not like to see the Paine Mountain area disturbed for this project. He suggested other sites might have higher initial costs but might be a better choice in the long run. Mr. Poor said the bid process found no other viable sites. Gerard LaVarnway lives near Cheney Farm and he agreed with Thomas Bright this was a "sacred space" that should not be disturbed. He then asked how the power generated on the site would be delivered to NED. Mr. Fitzhugh said new power lines would be connected to the existing lines now coming down Byam Hill. Colin Bright asked if new long-term power purchase agreements were envisioned after many of the current contracts expire after 2022. Mr. Poor said the resources were available and VPPSA would assist NED in any negotiations. He added this was not the dire situation the graph might suggest. Mr. Fitzhugh confirmed VPPSA helps NED negotiate long-term contracts so it doesn't have to "spot purchase" energy at high-demand periods when it is more expensive. He still felt the proposed Cheney Farm solar project would supply NED with renewable energy for several years. Mr. Fitzhugh again noted Northfield is located in a valley so potential solar farm sites are very few. He agreed Cheney Farm is a valuable resource that would be difficult to lose but he felt the local options were limited. Colin Bright did not believe the loss of Cheney Farm would be worth the potential benefits described tonight.

Based on the feedback tonight, Mr. Pearish believes most Northfield residents favor renewable energy but would favor an alternative project. Ms. MacMartin has lived in Northfield for forty (40) years and over this time has used Cheney Farm for recreational purposes. She asked if there would be any public access to Cheney Farm, how many panels would be installed, how large they would be, and if installing fewer panels would allow for more access. Mr. Poor said there would be access to the area surrounding the solar farm, which would have to be fenced off for safety reasons. As for the size and number of the solar panels, he asked Jesse Stowell from Encore Renewable Energy to address this matter. Mr. Stowell said the solar panels now envisioned for this project would be about two and a half feet (2½') wide and about five feet (5') long. The current plan is to install between 5,500 and 6,000 solar panels on site. Mr. Poor said the actual footprint of the solar farm has not yet been determined so a smaller proposal could still be considered.

Deborah Maloney-Evans supports the concept of solar energy but has some concerns about this project. She asked what would be the impact of this project on the town budget. Board member Maxwell said there would be no impact as NED ratepayers would bear the cost of the project (and reap any benefits). Mr. Fitzhugh said there could be a positive impact on tax rates should this project result in tax revenue or PILOT from the installed infrastructure. Christine Elwell lives in the vicinity of the proposed project and is concerned about the amount of new traffic generated during the construction process. Laura Hill-Eubanks is a member of the Conservation Commission as well as serving as Planning Commission Chair. She noted there is a policy in place to protect the Town Forest and this should include Cheney Farm. Mr. Fitzhugh said he is still investigating whether Cheney Farm is considered part of the Town Forest. Ms. Hill-Eubanks added the area was in the Low Density Residential District. According to the Town Plan, this area is not meant for commercial development. She wanted know how this project could fit with that policy. Mr. Fitzhugh said the project was not really considered commercial and the Public Utilities Commission would review the project under the Section 248 process and look at the Town Plan. Mr. Fitzhugh added this project is at a very early stage in the development process.

Mr. Evans asked if the final decision whether to go forward with this project would be made by Northfield residents or NED ratepayers. Mr. Fitzhugh said as the locally-elected representative body, the Town Select Board would be making the final decision. Mr. Black asked if there had been any consideration of leasing property from Norwich University (NU) for this project. Mr. Fitzhugh has heard suggestions about using the former NU Ski Area but this site is likely far too steep for any development. Deborah Zuaro serves on the Conservation Commission and at a recent Electric Utility Commission meeting, she was told even with the ACP penalties, NED electric rates would remain lower than those for GMP and WEC. Mr. Fitzhugh said this might be the case at first but there are many factors that go into developing rates and there is no predicting GMP and WEC rates.

Ms. Stevens would like the Select Board members to consider the opinions of those who have expressed reservations about this proposed project tonight. She still cannot believe this is the only option for a renewable energy project in Northfield. Mr. Fitzhugh said this was the only viable site identified for a major solar project in this community that would be economically feasible. Other possible renewable energy projects may emerge at a later time but this is the only one now under consideration. Mr. Fitzhugh added the whole purpose of this public hearing was to inform Northfield residents about this proposal and gauge public opinion on this matter. He confirmed the opinions expressed tonight certainly will be taken into account.

Select Board Chair Goslant said the Select Board agreed to co-host this public hearing in order to receive public feedback on this proposed solar project. He emphasized the Select Board is not behind this project and no decisions have been made other than to hold this Public Hearing tonight. Chair Goslant felt it was clear almost all the people attending this hearing do not favor this project and this fact will be a part of the ongoing information gathering process.

Board member Maxwell then asked Mr. Fitzhugh to provide some additional background information about NED rates and renewable energy requirements. Mr. Fitzhugh noted NED rates now are the third lowest in the state. He added the maintenance contract with GMP had a great impact on keeping operating costs low. The Comprehensive Energy Plan approved by the State of Vermont sets a state-wide goal of obtaining ninety percent (90%) of our energy from renewable sources by 2050. Mr. Fitzhugh said NED will need to increase its portfolio of renewable energy sources to meet the requirements of the state's Renewable Energy Standard. In addition, the recently approved Act 174 requires municipalities to identify sites within their communities that could be used for renewable energy generation. The proposed solar project under discussion tonight was intended to help NED meet its renewable energy requirements for several years as well as provide emergency backup power in case of a natural disaster, etc.

State Representative Anne Donahue understands deciding whether to host such as project (and where) can be a very difficult decision. However, this matter concerns state public policy and Northfield must be willing to do its part to address climate change. Nancy LaVarnway asked how to best to keep Select Board members informed of their views on this matter. Chair Goslant said the direct route would be to contact the Board members by email either individually or as a whole (i.e. [Selectboard@northfield.vt.us](mailto:Selectboard@northfield.vt.us)). There also are indirect routes through postings on the Front Porch Forum, letters to local newspapers, etc. Chair Goslant said Select Board members would like to hear from everyone who has an opinion on this. Christine Barnes then thanked the Select Board and Electric Utility Commission for holding this public hearing. Mr. Fitzhugh said the time and date for the second hearing will be determined in the near future. He also encouraged residents to contact Select Board members with their views.

The Public Hearing adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the regular Select Board meeting of July 10, 2018.