

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
TOWN SELECT BOARD
ELECTRIC UTILITY COMMISSION
JOINT PUBLIC HEARING
Minutes of July 23, 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. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, T.J. Poor (Vermont Public Power Supply Authority), Laura Hill-Eubanks (Northfield Conservation Commission & Planning Commission), Debbie Zuaro (Northfield Conservation Commission), Patrick DeMasi (Utility Superintendent), Gerard LaVarnway, Nancy LaVarnway, Donald Wallace, John Scoville, Mary Lou Ulatowski, Francis Bell, David Black, Stephanie Maass, Kyle Maass, Forrest Spencer, Gail Parent, Jonathan Spencer, Mary McDaniel, Lisa Brucken, Rowley Brucken, Keith Ellsworth, Bob Tucker, Katrina DeMasi, Vladimir Stawicki, Mary Comiskey, Bernard Byrne, Colin Bright, Lydia Petty, Joseph Zuaro, Leslie Striebe, Ed Striebe, Robert Cruickshank, Chris Shea, Carolyn Stevens, John Stevens, Gretchen Dunn, Dave Packie, Gerold Noyes, Carol Noyes, Tim Schwartz, Michael Krause, Mary Dollenmaier, Fred Nadon, Conrad Rowell, and Dennis Miles.

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). Mr. Fitzhugh also has over forty (40) years of experience dealing with public power matters. This is the second of two public hearings held for the purpose of obtaining public views on a proposed solar project on Cheney Farm.

The Northfield Electric Department (NED) is one of twelve (12) public utility VPPSA members. Mr. Fitzhugh said NED serves about 1,600 residential customers (meters) in Northfield, which covers seventy-three percent (73%) of the residential meters, as well as all commercial and industrial customers. Mr. Fitzhugh said VPPSA asked its members to suggest possible solar project locations within their own service territory. The reasons behind this are to help VPPSA members reduce their carbon footprints, address global warning concerns, and to meet the Renewable Energy Standards obligations of member electric utilities. Vermont Comprehensive Energy Plan goals are that by 2050, ninety percent (90%) of all energy used in Vermont will be from renewable sources, and that starting in 2017, and increasing to 10% of the electric utility's energy in 2032, come from new renewable energy sources sited in Vermont. However, Northfield's topography makes it challenging to find acceptable sites for large solar farms. After reviewing municipal-owned properties, Mr. Fitzhugh recommended Cheney Farm as the most logical site for a feasibility study. These reasons include: 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. 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.

Mr. Fitzhugh said seven (7) potential developers bid on the Cheney Farm project. The developers also were asked to identify other possible solar farm sites in Northfield but they did not suggest any other locations. Preliminary plans indicate the completed solar farm would provide 1,500 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. He added Act 174 requires Northfield to identify locations in the town for renewable resources that are capable of generating 10,000 MWH of renewable energy by 2025, which would require the equivalent of six (6) Cheney Farm projects. Renewable energy projects are exempt from local zoning, but must meet development and aesthetics criteria in Section 248. Local municipal plans must include information on renewable energy source siting within the community.

Mr. Fitzhugh said the full economic benefits of the project depend on whether NED or VPPSA builds and controls the solar farm. The project has an expected life span of twenty-five (25) years, after which the panels could be removed from the site. After thus determining there was interest from developers, and that the project was economically viable, Mr. Fitzhugh said the next step was to hold public hearings to determine local opinion on this proposed Cheney Hill project. Mr. Fitzhugh emphasized the proposed solar project is in the very preliminary stages and for no reason should be considered a “done deal.” If the decision is made not to pursue this project, Mr. Fitzhugh is fairly confident NED would be able to find other renewable energy sources in order to meet its RES obligations.

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

Gretchen Dunn was grateful to the Select Board and Electric Utility Commission for holding this public forum so residents can state their opinions on this proposed project. She asked if six (6) renewable energy projects of this size really were needed for NED to meet its future obligations, would this require clearing land of trees, etc. Mr. Fitzhugh said possible sites would need to be identified first. It is possible some trees would have to be removed. He added wind turbines are less popular with most renewable energy advocates as they create a number of problems with their large infrastructure. This includes the fact they cannot be easily removed when no longer needed.

Michael Krause said Northfield’s local industries used to rely heavily on hydropower to operate mills, etc. He asked if there was any consideration of developing new hydropower projects along the Dog River. He considered hydropower to much less obtrusive and visually objectionable than solar farms or wind turbines. Mr. Fitzhugh, who is a professor of electrical and computer engineering at Norwich University (NU), did have one of his classes look into possible hydropower sites here as part of a senior project. However, the problem with relying on hydropower in Northfield is the Dog River has almost no flow during the summer months and therefore the amount of energy needed on a regular basis cannot be produced. Mr. Fitzhugh said the Nantanna Mill does produce about 770,000 kWh each year that now is being sold to the State of Vermont. This contract is ending soon so it is possible NED can reach an agreement to purchase this renewable energy source in future. Mr. Fitzhugh said the major hydropower producers, such as Hydro Quebec, usually have large reservoirs that provide a constant flow of water.

Leslie Striebe asked if were possible to site several solar panels on public buildings, such as schools. Mr. Fitzhugh said he favors such projects as every little bit helps. However, many structures are unsuitable for hosting solar panels as their rooftops might not be oriented properly towards the sun, they might not be able to bear the extra weight of the panels plus snow during the winter months, etc.

Rowley Brucken asked if this might not be the best time to pursue this type of project as there now is a tariff on solar panels imported from China, which makes them much more expensive. He also said solar technology seems to be improving and becoming more efficient each year so delaying this project now might result in a better one in the near future. Mr. Fitzhugh feels the physics of solar cells don’t show much room for much more improvement. Also, any new technology might not work as well as first promised. He then asked T.J. Poor, VPPSA’s Senior Power Supply Analyst, to address the tariff question. Mr. Poor said the second round of developer proposals did incorporate the extra tariff costs in their calculations. Also, if the project is approved this year and scheduled for construction in 2019, the solar panel tariffs would reduce slightly by that time. Also, there now is a thirty percent (30%) tax break for renewable energy projects that phases out after 2019. Mr. Poor believes it was possible the cost of this project could go down in five (5) to ten (10) years but he felt the bulk of price drops associated with solar facilities already have occurred.

Mary Dollenmaier asked how it could be determined whether Northfield residents will or will not support this project. Board member Maxwell said it was suggested at the previous public hearing that the matter be put to a public vote. However, that would raise some questions over who would be eligible to vote on this: taxpayers or ratepayers. This needs to be resolved before any vote can be held.

Donald Wallace considers this project to be a LULU, i.e. Locally Undesirable Land Use. He thinks solar farms take up land that could be used better for other purposes. He added he has fourteen (14) solar panels on his home that earn him credits on his NED bills. He has used the savings to purchase an electric car and heat pump that will be powered by his generated electricity. Mr. Wallace noted one Burlington Electric customer actually gets a rebate check each month. Mr. Fitzhugh believes that is a special case since newer net metering rules approved by the Public Utility Commission (PUC) specify customers generating more power than they use should receive refunds of unused credits after one year.

Gerard LaVarnway said he and a group of other concerned citizens have been circulating petitions in opposition to this project. He said over three hundred (300) signatures have been collected to date. In addition, of the thirty-one (31) emails sent to Select Board members on this topic after the first public hearing, twenty-eight (28) were in opposition. Mr. LaVarnway also questioned why Northfield's leaders would want to go forward with a renewable energy project that is counter to the recommendations of the Northfield Conservation Commission. Cheney Farm was incorporated into the Town Forest to ensure its preservation for future generations and he would not like to see this changed. Mr. Fitzhugh said the Cheney Farm area was put into the Town Forest in 1971 so that rules could be set for the harvesting of lumber on the site. This was considered an additional source of income for the Water Department, which owns the property. Any recreational use of the property was considered a secondary concern. Mr. LaVarnway noted these seven (7) acres constitute the only open area in the Town Forest.

Debbie Zuaro is a member of the Northfield Conservation Commission and she said among the Commission's responsibilities is to help protect the Town Forest. Ms. Zuaro believes like Mr. LaVarnway that Cheney Farm is a valuable resource that should be preserved for all residents. In addition, the recreational opportunities provided by Cheney Farm and the Town Forest attract visitors to town and Ms. Zuaro doesn't want to see this destroyed by a solar farm.

Laura Hill-Eubanks noted the property was sold to the Village of Northfield in 1966 so she wondered why the municipality did not obtain ownership (rather than the Water Department) when the Town and Village merged in 2014. Manager Schulz said the legal opinion he has received states Water Department ratepayers would receive the proceeds should the property ever be sold or leased. He added the Select Board members would be the ones to make any final decision regarding the future of Cheney Farm.

Joseph Zuaro is a Northfield taxpayer, NED customer, and also has installed solar panels on his property. He asked why the wellfield should be excluded as a possible solar project site. Mr. Fitzhugh said the threat to the community's water source would be too great to justify siting any project there. He added the area is about half the size as the proposed Cheney Farm project area so far fewer solar panels could be installed. Mr. Zuaro asked how often the enclosed underground reservoirs on Cheney Farm are checked for possible leaks. Utility Superintendent Patrick DeMasi said there was weekly testing for leakage and the reservoir was shut down for three (3) days every year for a thorough inspection.

David Packie has seen other Vermont communities locate solar farms in abandoned gravel pits or on former landfills. He felt Cheney Farm was a valuable resource that should not be compared to such wastelands. He asked if there were other ways to achieve the renewable energy goals without making such a sacrifice. Mr. Fitzhugh said he would not have brought this proposal forward if there were other local alternatives. However, he believes VPPSA will help NED meet its renewable energy commitments in any case. Mr. Poor said the Cheney Farm solar project would help NED meet all of its renewable energy requirements for the foreseeable future. However, he agreed it would be possible to find other options including those located in other VPPSA member communities. Mr. Packie feels this project has been rushed along without taking local opinion into account. It also is possible state requirements regarding renewable energy could be changed if there are difficulties with local compliance.

Carol Noyes is very concerned about the impact of global warming on this and future generations. When she sees solar farms or wind turbines while travelling through Vermont, she gets a positive feeling knowing some action is being taken to address this very real problem. Ms. Noyes doesn't know if this year's very hot summer can be directly linked to global warming but she is grateful to this community's leaders for being pro-active in trying to create local renewable energy sources.

Carolyn Zuaro is a millennial and she is grateful more Vermont members of her generation see the value of preserving our natural resources for recreational and other purposes. She would like Cheney Farm kept as it is for future generations.

Tim Schwartz lives in Northfield Falls and he believes all Northfield residents should have a say in whether this project should be pursued. He felt the real value of this open space could not be quantified in solely economic terms. Mr. Schwartz also is concerned about global warming but believes other options, such as smaller-scaled projects, should be presented to the public for their consideration.

David Black also feels Cheney Farm should be preserved as it is. He then asked for a show of hands of those present tonight to see how many supported or opposed the Cheney Farm solar project as presented. Almost all indicated opposition to the project. A significant number of those in attendance also said they needed more information about the project.

Michael Krause believes many communities around the world now are using organic waste conversion to generate power. The facilities used can be large and stationary or can be transported around by trailer. He can provide more information to Select Board members and to Northfield residents on request. Mr. Krause felt this indicates there are several alternatives to the Cheney Farm project that include new technology.

Lydia Petty said Cheney Farm is a most special place to her and she doesn't want it covered with solar panels. Her children use this field for sledding in the winter and for other activities throughout the year. Ms. Petty feels using this field for a solar project should be the very last option.

Jonathan Spencer was born in Northfield and has hiked up Cheney Farm since he was a boy. He would like the Select Board to be mindful of future generations when making decisions about Cheney Farm. He also would like other renewable energy options explored first.

Conrad Rowell has been President of the Norwich University Cemetery Association for about thirty (30) years. He said from the cemetery site, which is several hundred feet above the valley floor on Dole Hill, you can see the NU campus below as well as Cheney Farm across the valley. He would not like to see a solar farm spoiling the view from the cemetery and he believes those have (or plan to) purchase plots there feel the same way.

Board member Maxwell asked what would be the next step in the process now that the two (2) public hearings have been held. Mr. Fitzhugh said the Select Board will have to decide whether or not to proceed with the project. These public hearings have shown strong opposition to this project but the Select Board may want to determine whether this is an accurate perception by holding a public vote. Mr. Fitzhugh repeated there are other ways to meet the renewable energy requirements without disturbing Cheney Farm. He warned that if some private entity wanted to put a solar farm or wind turbines on private property in Northfield, there would be no requirement to hold public meetings like this one. Mr. Fitzhugh believes global climate change must be addressed at some time and he felt this project was Northfield's way of taking action so he presented this as an option to the community. Even if this particular project is rejected, Mr. Fitzhugh felt the fact that residents now are discussing renewable energy options in a serious manner is a positive development for the Northfield community.

Carolyn Stevens has been grateful for the respectful tone of tonight's meeting and hopes all present appreciate the valuable information that has been provided. She also hopes the conversation about renewable energy, climate change, etc. will continue.

Chair Goslant said the Select Board members did not commence this process but merely acted on a recommendation from the Electric Utility Commission. He added some legal issues still need to be resolved, such as ownership of the land, before any decision can be made. Chair Goslant noted the Village Trustees were the ones who worked on utility matters prior to merger so he and other former Town Selectmen are rather new to this. He emphasized that no commitment has been made so far to any course of action. The Select Board members are still gathering information at this time and will make every effort to make a decision that will best suit the Northfield community.

Board member Goodrich expressed her gratitude to all those who attended tonight's meeting. Board member Maxwell encouraged all those interested in local public power issues to attend the monthly Utility Commission meetings as that is where such matters are discussed on a regular basis and proposals such as Cheney Farm solar project are first brought up for consideration.

The Public Hearing adjourned at 8:46 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 August 14, 2018.