

PLANNING COMMISSION
Draft Minutes
March 4, 2015

Members Present: Sally Miller, Paul Highberg, Sam Segal, Keri Cole
Members Absent: Susan Boston, Nick Scheu, Marilyn Spaulding
Others Present: Tom Garden, Michael Brands

I. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 7:30 p.m..

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the February 4, 2015 meeting were approved as submitted.

III. NEW BUSINESS

A. Design Review Amendments

A Public Hearing was held for the proposed Design Review amendments.

The Town Planner distributed copies of the amendments with both strikeouts (text removed) and underlines (text added).

The amendments were drafted specifically to address comments made by an Environmental Court judge in a recent appeal case. The judge had suggested clarifications in certain areas of the regulation.

At a later date when the Village Zoning Regulations are rewritten, the entire Design Review section will be reviewed for additional changes.

There were no interested parties in attendance. There were no comments sent in previous to the hearing.

Mr. Segal noted a preference for retention of the phrase “Change is and should be part of the community.” in the third paragraph of: A. Statement of Character.

After additional discussion, Ms. Cole moved with a second by Mr. Segal to approve the proposed amendments to the Design Review Regulations as submitted. The motion passed with a 4-0 vote.

The Board of Trustees will be informed of the Planning Commission's approval and will schedule a public hearing, which could be as soon as April 14, 2015.

B. Taftsville Solar Farm

Solar developer Tom Garden, representing Triland Partners, LP, discussed a proposal for a solar farm in Taftsville. At the moment he is obtaining a "sense of the board" to gauge community support for the project.

Triland Partners, LP develops solar farms in New England. Most of their work has been in Vermont. They built a 2 megawatt solar farm located at Interstate 89 Exit 5 in Williamstown in the northeast quadrant of the intersection.

The Taftsville plant would contain two phases, both 500 kw facilities. The first phase is to be oriented more towardly the community, whereby local residents would be encouraged to buy into the system.

The Taftsville site is located directly behind and south of the Taftsville Cemetery. The access to the site runs just east of the cemetery. The property is a 15.3 acre field. It is set behind numerous homes and businesses that abut Route 4. The site has great southern exposure. Most important, it is located close to the Taftsville GMP power station so it can connect directly into the main electric grid. Each 500 kw phase would cover 6 - 8 acres.

The intent is to start building in the third quarter of 2015.

A second 500 kw phase, equal to the first phase, would be built at a later date. Each phase would have 2,100 panels placed on a ground mounted metal frame. Panels would be placed with the bottom edge four feet off the ground and the highest point would be ten feet above ground level. The panels would be fixed at a 28-30 degree angle.

Mr. Garden has talked to all but one abutter, all of whom noted support of the project.

A map of the site showing Class III wetlands along the upper third of the property was shown. The wetland information was taken from the Town's Critical Areas Map.

Mr. Garden noted he has hired Gilman and Briggs to do a wetland evaluation once the snow recedes. Rebecca Chalmers, Wetland Specialist for ANR, is also scheduled to do a site visit. There would be no excavation or filling within the wetland areas. Per State law, solar farms are technically allowed in a Class III wetland as long as no filling or excavation takes place.

A high power line along the south property line runs to the Village from the Taftsville station.

An upgraded power line will be required to connect the solar farm to the power station. A "T" pole would replace existing single phase poles. The poles would be ten feet taller than existing power poles. They would be placed along Route 4 to minimize impacts to the neighbors.

Chair Miller noted the community supports alternative energy but is also concerned with aesthetics. It was noted the site would be visible from Route 4 through the abutting properties. The back sides of the infrastructure support systems would be seen.

The Town Planner stated that with a 25-foot setback there is plenty of room to allow trees and shrubs to grow which could serve as a vegetative screen.

It is Mr. Garden's intent to work with abutters regarding screening should such be necessary. Obviously one has to allow continued solar access to the panels.

A State historic preservation officer has visited the site. Adequate screening for the cemetery which abuts on the northwest corner of the site was requested.

Vegetation would be kept in check by yearly mowings around the panels. Aside from that there would be little maintenance required. There would be no adjustment of the panels for winter / summer sun. Weather wise, wind is the main issue.

The estimated value of each phase is \$2,000,000 per 500kw facility. The facility would generate tax revenue for the schools and the Town.

A lengthy discussion of REC - Renewable Energy Credits took place. It was noted GMP currently has \$40-\$50 million in REC they can't sell. The State legislature is currently sponsoring a bill to force retirement of RECs. GMP is currently looking to build 20 megawatts of solar to offset their REC predicament.

Solar farms are exempt from local permitting. A permit review process is conducted by the Public Service Board. A letter of proposal is required to be sent 45 days in advance of a PSB review to potential interested parties. This would include various State agencies, abutters, local government and regional planning commission. Mr. Garden noted he has the right to ask for a waiver of the 45 days but has no intention of doing so. The wetlands evaluation will not have been conducted before submittal of the letter. The advanced letter allows comments to be made to the PSB in a timely manner.

The PC noted concerns with wetland impacts and visibility of the facility.

All members were encouraged to view the site to enable a response once the letter of proposal is submitted.

IV. NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled for **April 1, 2015 at 7:30 p.m..**

VI. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 8:45 p.m..

Respectfully submitted,

Michael Brands, AICP