

WALLINGFORD ENERGY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the May 4, 2021 Meeting

David Castonguay called the virtual meeting to order at 6:35. Participating via Zoom: John Armstrong, Doug Blodgett, David Castonguay, Katherine MacLauchlan, and Ken Welch. Robbie Stubbins and Jay White joined by telephone.

Minutes. John thanked Doug for writing the April minutes. "It was a nice respite." After a brief discussion, the April minutes were approved unanimously.

Town Hall. Since no contractor submitted a bid, the air sealing and painting job has been put off. "What are you going to do?" Ken concluded. "Everyone is just maxed out right now." Robbie added that the job was probably too small to make it worthwhile when contractors are busy.

Solar Recognition. David asked whether the award document is ready to go. John replied that no one had commented on the version he emailed to committee members. David moved that we should conclude that it is approved and ready to go. There was no objection. John recalled that there was discussion in April about a cover letter that would accompany the certificate. David offered to draft the letter and circulate to the committee by email. Ken asked whether the certificates would be delivered or mailed. David replied that mailing seemed to make the most sense. "I have a mailing address database set up and it is simple to print labels. It's my expectation that people will open the envelope, smile and then file it away."

Governor Scott's American Rescue Act Initiative. David asked whether this was a proposal that the governor is submitting to the legislature. John replied that it was and that he was impressed by the section on energy and climate change. "It proposes the changes that need to happen and doesn't get bogged down in feel good initiatives. For example vehicle charging stations. Not only does it supply funding but it emphasizes taking care not to oversaturate the market. It also proposes spending 21 million dollars over three years for weatherization promotion. That's enough for a full blown marketing campaign which I think is the only way to get people to take action. The proposal goes on to address weatherizing rental properties. This is a problem: tenants have no incentive to improve the landlord's property and landlords don't save money on the tenant's oil bill. The proposal also includes

approaches to the problem of absorbing excess renewable energy suggesting, for example, municipal energy storage.

In other words, there are things in this plan that are, I think, major steps forward from Vermont's current and previous Comprehensive Energy Plans."

David commented on some remarks the governor made at one of his covid press conferences. "He was asked repeatedly about how the American Rescue Plan money should be spent and he seemed worried that some legislators would like to use the money to offset budget deficits rather than to make long term investments."

Doug had a similar take. "The rescue plan has about a billion dollars for Vermont and for us, that's a lot of money. It all comes down to what the legislature does or does not want to do. But I agree that the governor sounded frustrated."

David proposed that the committee should communicate directly with legislators from Wallingford and encourage them to view this proposal positively. Doug asked whether there were specific legislative committees that were tasked with reviewing the governor's spending proposal. David promised to research this. "I think it would be more efficient for us to do this individually rather than as a group — and it may be more effective as well."

Someone complained about the glacial pace of legislative action, but Doug reminded us that legislators are usually eager to adjourn by the end of May. "They can't take forever and this may be part of the reason the governor is concerned. But the difference is that this time there is a billion dollars and it doesn't have to be spent by next year. Legislators often talk about things until they are blue in the face but finally realize that there aren't any resources. This is an exception. It is a once in a lifetime to be able to act."

Ken agreed. "What we need to do is to make sure the legislature stays on task." To which Rob replied "If you figure out how to do that, I'm sure that you'll let the rest of us know."

[On May 24 Johanna Miller of the Vermont Natural Resources Council sent out an email asking recipients to congratulate legislators for committing "\$250 million in funding for ... climate programs over the next four years." This is \$50 million more than the governor asked for in the climate change portion of his budget request.]

Energy Zoning. David proposed that we take up as new business an email John circulated about renewable energy zoning. John reported that he had looked over the planning commission's most recent zoning draft and found what looked to be some serious restrictions that mostly have to do with setbacks. "Depending on how you read it, it looks like

the draft zoning regulations mean that landowners could develop no more than four or five acres of a ten acre field. I think that's a waste of resources."

Jay (who was late to join the meeting) had a different take on this. "A town's zoning has no jurisdiction over power generation. That's strictly a state issue. Rutland Town learned this the hard way when they tried to say that rezoning prohibited a solar project on Cold River Road. They spent a huge amount of money on lawyers and they lost. Section 248 establishes the setback and screening requirements, and Act 56 of 2015 sets up a solar siting task force to allow a town to elaborate on those requirements. But if you just put restrictions into a town plan, the Public Utilities Commission is not going to even consider it."

"But from a practical point of view," John replied, "zoning documents can make it difficult to get a project built. It can also make generation projects more intrusive than they need to be. If you can only develop a portion of a property, then you'll need to develop more properties. In other words, fewer large projects are better than more smaller projects."

Rob raised the issue of whether the utility is able to accept large amounts of solar generation. "We are close to saturation in terms of what Green Mountain Power is willing to accept. This means that there is no point in even trying to propose a large-scale development in Wallingford."

Jay added that GMP currently has a moratorium on anything larger than two megawatts,

"But GMP must realize that they can't just keep the same business model they've used for a century," John replied. "If you look at where things are going — and this is what the governor's plan addresses — you have to have more ways of moving electricity around; you have to have abundant local storage; and you've got to change the way people use electricity so that there are loads for local generation."

David asked whether the committee could advocate for GMP to change.

Robbie complained about how the utility drives up the cost of projects. "Anything over 500 kW requires a recloser device to take the array off line remotely. That adds \$70,000 to the cost. They also charge a lot to extend three phase lines. The GMP interconnection fee for a recent project was about \$200,000."

"It seems to me," David said, "that this takes us straight back to the American Rescue Plan in terms of the state government coming up with the funds."

"And the R&D has to get better," Robbie added. "The technology needs to get better. Part of it is that you cannot control the flow of electricity from solar panels. In the end, it all

comes down to dollars and cents. Even the billion dollar dump that we're going to get will not be anywhere near enough. I just don't call this a reliable source of energy, at least as things stand now. The battery storage technology in particular, has to be way better before you can use it control the flow."

"Can I just bring it back?" Doug asked. "We're getting pretty global and I'd like to get back to this zoning issue. What kind of feedback do we want to bring back to the chair of the Planning Commission? It strikes me that zoning should be nuanced. Does a residential project need to be screened? And then consider the project in the gravel pit. That's a great site and it's pretty substantial in size — and almost no one sees it. So it's very nuanced and I don't know how nuanced the zoning is going to be to match that."

John pointed out that the Planning Commission will have a meeting on May 21, and David suggested that it may be useful for someone to contact them on a back channel to suggest that our understanding of zoning for generation suggests that the Commission may not want to go forward with this. The committee agreed. Someone suggested that David take on this back channel role. He was dubious. "Having spent 30 years in southwestern Virginia as an uppity Yankee, I question the advisability of me as the new kid on the block being the point person."

"I kind of know Erika," Katherine volunteered. "If Jay could send me a list of the main points, I could sit down and share it with her." Jay agreed, and David was happy that Katherine was available.

David suggested that we try to sum up. "Katherine will share some information on energy zoning with the planning commission. I'm going to do some investigating to see which committee or committees are focussed on coming up with energy policy and applying the money from the American Rescue Act to advance those policies. Is there any other thing we need to be doing?"

Town Hall Redux. Ken asked whether we could circle back to the situation at Town Hall now that Jay has joined the meeting.

"So do you want to hear my sad report?" Jay asked. He reviewed an audit he and Ken did and then a more formal energy audit in the early fall. "But the town didn't act until November when they decided to weatherstrip the doors. They put it out for bid and only got one response, a bid for \$930 to weatherstrip four exterior doors. And they did a horrible job.

“The other thing that was disappointing is that the painting was put out to bid — but without the air sealing portion of the job. That is a problem. The only way to seal around the windows is to do it from the outside, and the only way to do that is to use a lift, which is also needed for the painting. But to do only one part of a job — the painting — doesn’t make sense. If you have the lift, you should do both parts.”

Ken reported that the town held a bidder’s meeting and no one came. David asked whether the town has any kind of project manager who supervises these expenditures. Ken said it does not. [Sandi recently proposed reactivating the town’s building committee.]

Rob recalled a project his company did at the Town Garage a few years ago. “The people we worked with had a list of what needed to be done but it wasn’t complete or properly constructed. When the project was finished, we had the state inspector come out but nobody from the town checked to be sure that we did what we were supposed to do.”

Jay offered to assist with bidding out the painting and sealing next year. “If you offered that, Jay,” David exclaimed, “I think Sandi would accept your help immediately.”

New Business. “There’s no new business in the agenda,” David recalled, “but let me just offer a couple of items we should address. Will our next meeting be in person or by Zoom? And we also need to discuss whether we’re planning to meet during the summer.”

There was a motion and a second to meet in person. The motion passed unanimously. David recalled that Doug had mentioned that we generally take at least two months off during the summer and suggested we consider that at the June meeting.

He also proposed a few agenda items for June. He asked member to list things that the committee had done in the past and also suggestions for new initiatives. “For example, I’m considering putting up additional solar panels in anticipation of buying an electric vehicle.” He offered to create a blog on do it yourself solar and on how to integrate that with a solar vehicle.

“I was also checking YouTube videos about EVs and I learned that Formula Ford will soon be getting three electric Mustangs. So I went up there, and in the course of talking with them I mentioned a *New York Times* article that compared costs of a Nissan Altima and a Tesla 3. If you compute all the costs of maintenance, gasoline and so forth, the cost of the Tesla over seven years was less than the cost of the Altima, and this is in spite of the fact that the Tesla is no longer eligible for the \$7,500 federal tax rebate. And I found that to be extraordinary.

“When I mentioned this to the sales people at Formula Ford, they were astounded. And I said, ‘You would think that some smart marketing person in Detroit would come up with a chart like this for you to put on your wall.’

“That kind of a graphic might be something that we could do. That’s just an example, and I hope people would create lists and pass them around.”

Rob reported on a contractor who is planning to build 11 DC fast chargers around Vermont with one in Rutland and another in Ludlow. A second company will be putting a DC fast charger near the WallMart downtown. “I was surprised by this because I thought it would take longer for people to start building out infrastructure, but it looks like it’s coming along.”

Adjournment. David asked whether people had more to talk about. John replied that it was dinner time. Katherine made a motion to adjourn. Ken seconded it. No one was opposed. David concluded: “I’d say it’s Miller Time.”

The meeting was adjourned at 7:50.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, June 1 at 6:30 in person at Town Hall. [At the meeting Katherine proposed June 8 but we no longer postpone our meetings to avoid conflict with the selectboard. Later John proposed (and everyone agreed) that the meeting be put off until the 8th because the agenda was delayed.]

— Submitted by John Armstrong