

Town of Hinesburg
Planning Commission Meeting Minutes
November 11, 2020
Approved November 25, 2020

Members Present: Maggie Gordon, Barbara Forauer, Marie Gardner, John Kiedaisch, Dennis Place, Denver Wilson, Rolf Kielman, James Donegan

Members Absent: Dan Myhre

Also: Alex Weinhausen (Director of Planning & Zoning), Chuck Reiss, Mike Bissonette, Andrea Morgante, Merrily Lovell, Carl Bohlen, Johanna White

Maggie G. called the meeting to order at approximately 7pm.

Meeting Procedures:

Alex W. explained the meeting was being held remotely via Zoom due to the covid-19 state of emergency and the closure of the Town Office. He reviewed remote meeting protocols.

Agenda Changes:

None.

Public Comments for Non-Agenda Items:

None.

Town Plan Revision Public Hearing – Energy Plan (Chapter 8):

Alex W. provided an overview of the proposed Town Plan revisions, which involve the energy chapter (chapter 8) of the plan, and corresponding changes to energy chapter action items listed in chapter 10 of the plan. He said one reason for the update is to better understand current and projected energy usage. Another reason is so that the Town will have more say when utility projects are reviewed by the State Public Utility Commission (PUC). Currently, Town Plan recommendations are considered by the PUC; however, with an enhanced energy plan, Town Plan recommendations will be given “substantial deference” in PUC proceedings – i.e., recommendations presumed to be correct and followed by applicants.

Alex W. said that while some of the energy action items from the existing Town Plan are preserved, most of chapter 8 has been rewritten. The proposed language provides extensive data on existing and projected energy usage in a variety of sectors (e.g., electricity, heating, transportation). It lays out objectives to reduce energy usage that are consistent with the State’s Comprehensive Energy Plan, with a focus on efficiency gains and building weatherization. It also outlines objectives to transition away from fossil fuels in favor of power from electricity, and it explains that we will need to generate substantially more renewable energy, particularly from solar. Nine new supporting maps are also part of the changes.

Alex W. said that the new energy chapter was written in 2018-2019 by the Hinesburg Energy Committee with assistance from staff at the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission. In the last few years, regional planning commissions have assisted many communities across the state to do enhanced energy planning. He said that the Hinesburg Planning Commission took up the proposal this summer, and made minor revisions to the action items at the beginning of the chapter, in consultation with the Energy Committee.

Chuck Reiss reiterated that the Energy Committee worked on this intensively for quite awhile, and wrapped up their work about a year ago. He recognized substantial work done by Energy Committee member Bill Scott, and by Emily Nosse-Leirer from the regional planning commission staff. He said he was here tonight to help represent the earlier work of the Energy Committee, and to speak for himself in terms of further conversation and questions.

Andrea Morgante asked for clarification on the PUC review process – specifically, if a citizen were opposed to a project, could that person reference Town Plan recommendations in support of their concerns. Alex W. said yes. Once the Town Plan is adopted, and the enhanced energy plan portion is approved by the regional planning commission, the PUC should give substantial deference to Town Plan recommendations, regardless of which interested party raises them.

Andrea M. recommended following up the Town Plan revision with regulation revisions to help implement the vision in the State's comprehensive energy plan at the local level. Chuck R. noted that various action items speak to this, including action item 8.3.1 that recommends strengthening zoning and subdivision regulations to require that all buildings be designed to maximize passive and active solar gain. Alex W. noted action item 8.5.2 that recommends regulation or ordinance changes to require that new developments incorporate electric charging stations.

Mike Bissonette complimented the Energy Committee on its work. He asked if the committee considered potential unintended consequences for low and moderate income households – particularly with regard to the cost of new housing given goals for net zero homes. Chuck R. said the committee did discuss this, and noted that higher initial construction costs are offset in part by energy efficiency incentives (e.g., rebates and tax credits). Also, he noted that more energy efficient homes result in greater affordability in the medium and long term due to lower monthly costs for heating and electricity. He said that some banks are considering interest rate adjustments for energy efficient homes, which could help address initial purchase price concerns.

James D. said he agrees with both Mike and Chuck. He asked if the energy chapter includes recommendations for programs to help lower income buyers, or if such recommendations could be added to the chapter. Chuck R. said there is an action item (8.4.6) for the Town to work with Efficiency Vermont and other partners to educate homeowners about higher efficiency options and net zero homes – both for new construction and via renovation of existing housing stock. Chuck R. said the Town could come up with a list of resources for rebates and incentives for lower income families. John K. said the Town could create a fund to provide assistance to low and moderate income home buyers, possibly utilizing the Town's existing revolving loan fund for housing and economic development.

Mike B. clarified his concern that requiring highly energy efficient or net-zero homes could drive up the cost of housing. He wondered about the potential impact on first-time home buyers, and whether they might be priced out of the market.

Denver W. noted that the march to requiring more energy efficient new construction is being driven by the State's goals. He felt there is no way around this, and that it is not really controlled at the Town level. Chuck R. noted that the State's minimum energy efficiency code for new construction is updated every three years in order to make incremental improvements, with a goal toward eventually requiring new construction to be net-zero in 2030. Denver W. agrees with Mike's contention that higher energy efficiency requirements do increase the cost of construction.

Alex W. wondered if the initial purchase price of a new home really goes up that much when it is built to higher energy efficiency standards. He noted that Efficiency Vermont offers substantial rebates and incentives that may offset increased cost. He also wondered what the magnitude of the cost increase really

is. He felt a net increased cost in the range of \$2,000 is unlikely to be an affordability problem, but a net increased cost of \$10,000-\$20,000 would be a different matter. Chuck R. agreed that the cost differential between a base-level efficiency home and a high-performance home probably isn't a lot. He said that he'd be willing to do a comparison – e.g., for a 1500 square foot home, conventional vs. net zero.

Andrea M. said that any unintended consequences wouldn't happen due to adoption of the Town Plan revisions, since the Town Plan outlines vision, not regulations. She said such consequences could be evaluated further when regulation changes are considered.

Dennis P. gave an example of a project he worked on, in which he added attic insulation, but was then told that the project wouldn't be eligible for energy rebates unless an energy audit was done. He was disappointed, given that the attic insulation is the most common recommendation for energy efficiency improvements, and given that the cost of an energy audit was substantial – i.e., partially or wholly negating the rebate benefit. Alex W., Andrea M. and John K. all agreed that to achieve the State's energy reduction goals, the State should have a program to cover the cost of an energy audit for every household.

Andrea M. said she doesn't support advocating for more biofuel usage given that such fuels typically come from mono-culture crops (e.g., sunflower) that deplete soil nutrients and are not sustainable.

Carl Bohlen said that he supports the new energy chapter, and that it is important that we focus on a response to climate change. He thinks we should consider housing affordability, and that this assessment should look at both initial purchase price and long-term affordability. He thinks we should push the State to invest more in energy efficiency measures. He said it makes sense to consider a revolving fund for energy efficiency improvements, but only after we analyze whether this is necessary given the cost versus return on investment.

Johanna White said that addressing global warming should be the main goal of the energy chapter.

Denver W. noted a written comment from Nathan Fry that encouraged developing micro-hydro energy at the outlets of Lake Iroquois and Sunset Lake. Alex W. said he wasn't sure if these could be viable micro-hydro sites, but that he has heard that micro-hydro development costs can be a significant road block. Chuck R. said that the regulatory process with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) for micro-hydro is difficult. Mike B. said we might want to talk to Rocky Martin, as he believes Rocky looked into this when he was the Town's Director of Buildings and Facilities. Andrea M. wondered if there was a way to generate hydro energy from the Town's wastewater treatment facility discharge. She noted that most of the water control structures in Hinesburg are privately owned, except for one at the Town cemetery. Alex W. wondered if hydro power could be generated using the water pressure and flow in the Town's water system – i.e., tapping the energy of water flowing down from the Piette Road storage tank into the main system.

Maggie G. asked for additional comments, and then turned to the review of written comments that had been submitted. The Commission reviewed comments by Lenore Budd. Lenore's comments noted the following:

- It would be a shame to gobble up open areas and potential development areas in the village with solar arrays. See page 3, action item 8.3.4, and the figure on page 18.
- How will we document whether an existing building is weatherized or needs weatherization? See page 3, action item 8.4.4.
- Measuring energy consumption baselines will be challenging, and is not clearly addressed. Will it be determined for each resident/household or town-wide? See page 8, which states that 2050 total energy use per capita will be 45% lower than in 2015.

Chuck R. said that we need to be flexible on what type of weatherization happens to any particular structure. It will depend on the opportunities for that structure, and will have to be cost effective. There's always room

for weatherization improvements (most often air sealing), but some improvements may not be cost effective, and may be better addressed through increased renewable energy production (e.g., rooftop solar).

John K. felt that community-wide measures and goals are acceptable, versus some sort of house-by-house comparison of energy usage from 2015 to 2050. Denver W. questioned where the data in the chapter comes from. Chuck R. said the data is based on the Long-Range Energy Alternative Planning model (LEAP model) that estimates Hinesburg's energy usage based on aggregated data.

Nancy Dunlap's written comments focused on the goal to reduce energy usage by 45% by 2050. She felt this was unrealistic, and wondered if the expected cost had been calculated. She was concerned that the cost could exceed the cost of energy being used. She also noted that calculating energy reduction will have to be done at a large scale – not for individual homes/buildings.

Chuck R. noted that even as we decrease our overall energy usage, we will actually need to use more electricity in order to transition away from fossil fuels (heating, transportation). As a result, we will need more renewable energy generation. Andrea M. noted that transportation energy usage has gone down with more people working from home.

Nathan Fry's written comments were supportive of several provisions in the proposed energy chapter. Barbara F. said she was appreciative of Nathan's comments encouraging rooftop solar, including on parking structures.

Alex W. reviewed three recent suggestions made by staff at the regional planning commission. He said the first two suggestions (tidy up list of State and local siting constraints to avoid duplication; clarify preferred site language) were straightforward, and easy to address. He said he wasn't sure changes were warranted based on the third suggestion – i.e., specifying how much forest clearing is allowed for renewable energy installations. Maggie G. said she thought the language related to agricultural and forest impacts was fine as drafted by the Energy Committee.

Chuck R. said that he's been thinking about ways to provide guidance on future determinations of preferred sites on a case by case basis. He said that projects can garner preferred site status either by inclusion in the Town Plan or by a joint letter from the Planning Commission and the Select Board, along with support from the regional planning commission. He clarified that preferred site status is particularly useful, because it makes small to mid-scale group net-metering easier. Without preferred site status, 50% of the energy from a net-metered project has to be used by the owner of the property. With preferred site status, the energy from the project can be shared across more people – e.g., an entire neighborhood, people throughout the community.

Chuck R. said he's been thinking about preferred site designation guidance such as: 1) size of the installation (small to mid-size - 15kw-150kw); 2) appropriateness given the neighborhood (e.g., minimizing visual impact); 3) participation of neighbors via group net metering; 4) concurrent agricultural use (e.g., sheep grazing, bee habitat, etc.); 4) access to the electrical grid. Chuck said these were just some ideas he had, which would be in addition to consideration of the site constraints listed in the energy chapter (e.g., steep slopes, wetlands, etc.). With that said, Chuck said he doesn't want to delay the adoption of the plan revisions by spending more time crafting language for preferred sites. He said a preferred sites policy could be crafted afterward to help guide the Planning Commission and Select Board.

Denver W. said this seems like a separate conversation that would be fine to take up as a policy after the Town Plan is adopted.

Maggie G. closed the public hearing. Alex W. said he would do a track changes version of the energy chapter for the next meeting, so that the Commission could review and then vote on whether to forward the proposal to the Select Board.

Contractor Yard & Vehicle Repair Regulation Revisions:

Maggie G. said this agenda item needs to be continued to the next meeting, given that the energy plan discussion took much longer than anticipated.

Meeting Minutes – October 14, 2020:

Rolf K. moved to approve the minutes of the October 14, 2020 meeting. Barbara F. seconded the motion. The motion passed 8-0.

Other Business:

Aegis Renewable Energy Solar Project at the old Town landfill

Alex W. said that at a meeting a month or two ago, the Commission had approved a letter of support for a solar project by Aegis Renewable Energy on the old Town landfill on Observatory Road. The letter indicated support for the project, and support for preferred site designation given that it was on and/or adjacent to the old Town landfill. He said the Town Administrator has prepared a new letter for both the Select Board and the Planning Commission to sign. The new letter was in the meeting packet, and is similar, expressing support for the location being a preferred site. Denver W. moved to approve the joint letter, and authorize Maggie Gordon to sign on behalf of the Commission. John K. seconded the motion. The motion passed 8-0.

The Commission discussed whether or not to reschedule the November 25 meeting given that it is the evening before Thanksgiving. Most members said they could still attend, so the meeting will be held as planned.

Maggie G. adjourned the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,
Alex Weinhagen, Director of Planning & Zoning