

Final

**Middlebury Energy Committee (Virtual and Town Offices (small conference room))
Wednesday, August 17, 2022 at 9:00 am
Minutes**

Present: Ross Conrad, Howard Widelitz, Richard Hopkins, Dan Rafferty, Mike Roy, Steve Maier, Bill Cunningham, Lindsey Fuentes-George

Absent: Liv Herdman, Diane Munroe

Guests: John Barstow, Jonathan Miller, Andy Hooper, Ian Phair, Ben Dorr, Laura Asermily

Meeting called to order at 9:03 am

Review Agenda – There were no proposed changes to the agenda.

Review minutes for last month – Since the minutes were sent out with not enough time for a thorough review, the review of the minutes from the July 20th meeting were deferred to the next committee meeting in September.

Vermont Solar Fund LLC – Ian Phair and Ben Dorr were present at the meeting to discuss their new venture which has been in existence for about a year. They are local with Ian living in Cornwall. Their business objective is to work with non-profit and tax-exempt entities who should partner with someone on solar projects to take advantage of the tax credits. They also offer financing for those not wanting to pay any of the upfront costs but can own the project once it is paid off. They are in the process of completing some local projects including the Congregational Church in town.

The business model is to pay Vermont Solar Fund for the electricity generated by the panels at the normal rate until the project is paid off at which time the cost the town receives the net metering credits. The projects typically pay back in the 10–15-year range. Ross asked if the cost of the electricity during the pay-it-down period fluctuates with the Green Mountain Power (GMP) rate changes over time. Ian said the charge will fluctuate based on the rate change. As the rates go up, the savings increase since it is based on the difference between the current and net-metering rates. Ian clarified that GMP maintains the Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) for these projects. There is an option for the entity to keep the RECs, but it will stretch out the payment period.

Steve asked if the Congregational church needed all the electricity since it is also participating in the Acorn Solar project in Bristol. Ian said the additional solar he is adding will provide 125% of their needs which is expected to be needed with future consumption. They had not previously installed solar panels on the church for financial reasons. John Barstow said he is still waiting for solar panels on the south facing roof on the Town Office building. Ian said that is one of the reasons for coming before the committee. Howard asked if the electricity generated prior to the Town purchasing the project would be counted against the net-metering cap. Ian said because the panels are behind the meter, it would not count towards the cap depending on how much is

Final

generated compared to the consumption. Dan asked whether storage would add to the revenue stream, but Ian wasn't familiar with how that would work. Ross asked if the Town Office building is wired to be able to support a rooftop array. Ian said an electrician would need to come in to evaluate the building. Steve clarified that the Town Office building is considered a net zero building since it is associated with a solar array in New Haven. We may need to look at the contract with the solar provider to see how it could impact the Town Office building.

Mike asked if Ian considered the same business model for heat pumps. They haven't considered since they have been too busy with solar installations. There was a brief discussion on the net-metering cap since Lindsey asked what the purpose was for the cap. It mostly comes down to cost and as Steve mentioned, the utilities lobbying against it due to the complexity of managing it.

To conclude the discussion, Ian mentioned the net-metering rates changing on September 1st by reducing the credit by \$.01. He offered to apply for a CPG for both the Town Office building and the canopy at the Amtrak station in Middlebury. After some discussion, it was agreed to pursue this with Kathleen to see if we can get on the August 23rd Selectboard meeting.

Actions from Discussion:

Look at existing contract for solar in New Haven to see if it impacts solar on the Town Offices.

Sidenote from Discussion - During the discussion with Ian, Andy wanted to make the Energy Committee aware of the taxes Vermont Gas pays the town (plus education taxes) for the 15.7-million-dollar infrastructure they pay taxes on in town. It comes to not quite \$375,000 per year.

Energy Committee Institutional Memory – Laura Asermily came to the meeting to share her experience with the Energy Committee from back when it was first formed. Laura mentioned participation in an adult discussion course called “Voluntary Simplicity” with Rev. Paul Bortz who suggested the response to climate change needs to come from small groups. They decided to educate the community with a fair and formed a cohort called, Middlebury Area Global Warming Action Coalition (MAGWAC) to work on these goals. They created the Earth Day Fair. MAGWAC decided to be successful, they needed to network with the stakeholders.

They also said they needed a paid coordinator and sought a grant to support this position. They received a New England Grassroots grant of \$10,000 to cover the Energy Coordinator position which was filled by Laura. The early focus was on energy efficiency and learning the difference between conservation and efficiency and teaching them how to measure their carbon footprint. They also worked with the college to measure the town carbon footprint back in 2007. They developed a Town Energy Plan in that same year. They used the Weight Watchers model to develop a low carbon diet, a 30-day plan to lower their carbon footprint. It included things like changing a persistent habit (e.g. washing in cold water). She said about 200 people participated in the project. They organized tours to showcase the various accomplishments from this project.

Laura then described the Home Energy Challenge through Efficiency Vermont where they would go to people's homes with a weatherization kit provided by Efficiency Vermont. It ended due to liability issues. A key to success was having neighbors talking to neighbors.

Laura discussed going to the Selectboard to offer taking on the role as the Energy Coordinator. MAGWAC was brought along which eventually morphed into the Town Energy Committee. She

Final

mentioned MAGWAC had more regional representation whereas as an Energy Committee was more limited. They created a resource directory like what CEAC has done recently. They also created the Green Energy Expo which became the Sustainable Living Expo. It was suggested Laura could provide some insight into the next topic on the agenda which is how to get the word out. Her answer is you go where the people are (e.g. putting up a display at the hockey game).

Public Outreach – Mike Roy initiated the discussion with his thoughts on the best way for the Energy Committee to provide outreach to achieve the mission and goals of the committee. He said we first need to understand the different segments being targeted and customizing the approach for each segment. Then understanding the different channels to communicate with each segment and tapping into the existing channels (i.e. Front Porch Forum, Addison Independent) rather than try to create new methods. We can create an inventory of channels and apply them to each of the segments. He said we also need to figure out what we are trying to accomplish with this communication, whether it is education, trying to change behavior or getting behind policy changes. He suggested creating a matrix identifying the different audiences and effective ways of communicating with each of them. As the committee decides on information we want to communicate, we can consult the matrix with the best approach to take depending on who we are trying to reach with the communication.

Ross was fully supportive of the approach Mike presented saying it allows us to be a more effective committee, it would give the committee more exposure and the opportunity to connect with the community. He said once the spreadsheet is in place, we should have a place in the agenda to discuss what should be communicated from the meeting and to who. Mike agreed to take an action to provide an initial draft of the spreadsheet. Laura wanted to add one more tool to be used for outreach which was the use of surveys. It was intended to be an awareness poll with entries asking, “do you know about heat pumps?” for example. Mike said doing polls like this over email is not valid research. Laura said it isn’t research, but rather outreach through awareness of topics. Steve said these are called push polls since they are pushing an agenda.

Actions from Discussion:

Mike volunteered to develop an initial draft of the spreadsheet.

Summit Housing Statement – Howard summarized the discussion at the Selectboard meeting regarding Energy Committee involvement with the Summit Housing group. He mentioned it didn’t go as hoped since the Selectboard was not supportive of the Energy Committee having direct communication with the Summit Housing representatives for various reasons. There will be a follow-up discussion and the committee needs to put together ideas for how we want to engage in the process if not with Summit directly. How else could we maintain our advocacy for what we would like to see in the development? This could be working with the Development Review Board (DRB) and the Planning Commission to discuss our ideas for a greener development. Howard thanked Jonathan Miller for the document he provided to the committee discussing money provided from the Inflation Reduction Act to be applied toward energy efficient development. Is the DRB aware of this and if not, the Energy Committee can show its value by identifying this information to them.

Final

Steve, who was present at the meeting mentioned Brian Carpenter's discontent with the Energy Committee based on Ross' petition against the easement allowing Vermont Gas to install a pipeline to the Stone Mill business. He said both Howard and Ross identified the fact that this was not coming from the committee, but rather from Ross as a town resident. Steve said he will continue his advocacy as a member of CEAC. He said he would like to see the Energy Committee and CEAC be able to work together to advocate for this and expressed the importance of being involved early in the process while decisions are being made about the project.

Lindsey suggested developing an educational series on what our committee is doing to reduce fossil fuel use and how the new development could affect that. Ross read from the minutes of the Selectboard meeting where it mentioned the Selectboard consider sending a letter to the developer for the Energy Committee to share its knowledge and expertise and suggested the letter Steve mentioned be written and submitted to the Selectboard focus on only that. John Barstow said not to forget we are all residents of Middlebury and that there is just as much strength, if not more advocating as private citizens rather than just the committee. Mike agreed with John, however we still need to address the role the Energy Committee has working with the other entities (e.g. Planning Commission) to further our goals and what changes we would like to see put in place with a proposal. We should suggest changes that say we are advisory to some of the other town entities. Ross mentioned there is a state guideline which limits Energy Committee's involvement as advisory only to the Selectboard. Ross suggested looking at the State charter to see if we want to make changes to it by working with our state representatives. Jonathan suggested developing policies and regulations be applied by the different committees at different points in the development process. He proposed implementing policy changes to provide the Selectboard with tools for future use. He also said as a member of the American Institute of Architects Committee on the Environment in Vermont, he can also add some value to the discussions. Dan said his reading of our committee's bylaws says that beyond the educational value the committee brings is our role to make sustainable energy efficiency recommendations to the municipality by communicating with the Selectboard, the Planning Commission and other groups with similar concerns. He also raised the point of large cities such as Boston banning fossil fuel infrastructure in new development. Mike said we can advocate for changes to allow these types of policies either at the local level or even more powerfully, the state level. Howard suggested communicating this with our local senators who are strong advocates for climate advocacy initiatives. To emphasize Dan's earlier point, it was mentioned the Selectboard approved the bylaws and therefore approve of its content. Steve wanted to make it clear that policy changes are a long-term effort and we don't want to lose sight of the immediate need to work on the Summit development. Howard suggested a large agenda item for our next meeting to work on the longer-term policy changes for Energy Committee involvement. Ross volunteered to work on that by first finding out what the state statutes are and seeing our options based on the statutes and our bylaws. Steve suggested a subcommittee work on this. Mike volunteered to participate along with Ross. Mike suggested Lindsey start socializing the proposal for the discussed policy changes.

There was discussion about when we could put together the letter requesting participation with Summit. Ross said we should at least have one ready to go. Lindsey said we should be able to get it onto the consent agenda for the next meeting. Steve suggested working this as a subcommittee and working it through email provided we don't reach a quorum.

Final

Actions from Discussion:

- Steve and Howard to work on letter to the Selectboard
- Ross to look into the existing state statutes and what policy changes should be considered.
- Howard to add a long discussion on the policy and procedural changes to the next meeting agenda.

Since we are over in time, the meeting was adjourned at 10:45