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Town of Middlebury Energy Committee Meeting Minutes Wednesday, August 19th, 2020

Present via Zoom: Howard Widelitz, Richard Hopkins, Diane Munroe, Steve Maier, Van Barth, Lindsey Fuentes-George

Absent: Lisa Bernardin, Liv Herdman, Ross Conrad

Meeting started at 9:00 a.m.

Review and Approval of Previous Minutes:

For the June minutes, Richard motioned, Diane seconded and all approved.

For the July minutes Richard motioned, Howard seconded and all approved.

Solar Subcommittee:

The solar subcommittee presented to the Selectboard and recommended going with the Acorn Co-op development option. The Selectboard seemed receptive to what the subcommittee was recommending. Nick Artim asked if the state law restricting entities to 500 kW of net-metering applied to all renewables or just solar. He also wanted to know if there were other opportunities for projects such as a digester, and whether signing on to a solar project would preclude other renewable opportunities. Lastly, Nick inquired about the possibilities of future technology providing better opportunities for the Town.

Ross reached out to Senator Chris Bray to get clarification on the 500 kW limit for net-metering. It seems to Senator Bray that the limit does apply to all renewables. Steve would like to get an additional answer from the Vermont Department of Public Service. Howard noted that even if the 500 kW limit applies to all renewables, we should still go forward with planning for solar.

Howard said that there have been discussions in town about installing a digester but the MEC has not been a part of that conversation. Steve heard that Bob Wells from the WWTP was undergoing an evaluation about updating and improving the plant and that this evaluation is considering the logistics of a digester. Richard said that using a digester would get the plant off of fossil fuels and be a major reduction in CO₂ emissions.

Steve will reach out and get another response on the net-metering cap question. Howard will reach out to Kathleen Ramsay and find out if the MEC can help Town staff in their evaluation process for the digester.

Greenhouse Gas Reduction Strategy:

Bill Kernan from Public Works provided the MEC with more information about heating systems and vehicle replacement and said it is unlikely that all heating and vehicles can be converted in 8 years. Considering this, it would be very difficult to meet the 80% reduction target in 8 years.

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There is some disagreement on what the goals for this effort should be. Richard believes that a two-step approach of 50% in 8 years, 80% in 15, could be more effective. Diane and Van think that it is better to aim for a harder goal and fail than set an easier goal. Steve suggested that town staff could feel more motivated by a goal they believe can actually be accomplished.

The subcommittee that is working on heating replacements consists of Richard, Van and Howard, with John Barstow as a guest. So far, the subcommittee has looked at calculations for heat pump replacements for the library and police station. Richard said that information he found online and in his own calculations suggest that switching from fuel oil to a heat pump provides slight monetary savings and switching from natural gas to heat pumps is more expensive. Richard's calculations for the library and police station support this. For the library, which is 16,000 square feet and heated by fuel oil, it would cost \$500,000 to install a heat pump but the operating costs are cheaper than the current boiler. This \$500,000 cost is the total cost and considering the heating system needs to be replaced either way, the subcommittee is not sure how this compares to installing a new boiler. The police station is 7,800 square feet and heated by natural gas. Switching to heat pumps would mean a small increase in operating costs.

Steve asked about the cost of oil and gas used in the calculations. He said that the price of fossil fuels is notoriously unstable, especially relative to electricity and whether that was noted in calculations. Richard said that the two main assumptions in his calculations are that the fuel prices are constant and the cost per square foot of switching to heat pumps is constant. Howard mentioned that there are a plethora of factors that impact the cost of fossil fuels and therefore trying to predict how oil and gas would change is too difficult for these calculations. Steve suggested that there be a guideline for the Town, where if oil and gas prices rise to a certain level, the Town will re-calculate the economic impact of switching to heat pumps.

Lindsey brought up that Town staff have limited time and their work needs to be considered as a cost. Staff are limited in the number of projects that can be taken on at once. She also said that short term goals can be more helpful since for a longer goal such as 15-20 years, the Selectboard and staff will likely be completely different by then.

Richard will continue working on improving the spreadsheet and is putting together a slideshow to present his findings to the Selectboard.

Community Outreach from Efficiency Vermont:

Howard spoke with Brad Long from Efficiency Vermont who wants to help the MEC publicize energy savings opportunities to community members. Howard said that the MEC has spent a lot of time recently working on projects for the Town and that he'd like to put more effort into community energy education. He said that community members would likely be more receptive to energy information that comes from fellow community members on the MEC. Brad Long will participate in the September meeting and provide more information.

Diane motioned, Van seconded and the meeting unanimously adjourned at 10:31 a.m.