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Town of Middlebury Energy Committee Meeting Minutes Wednesday, January 20th, 2021

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

Guest: Andrew L'Roe, Dave Carpenter, Dan Brown, Tiana Smith, Tom Murray, Beth Parent, John Barstow

Absent: Lisa Bernardin

Meeting started at 9:01 a.m.

Review and Approval of Previous Minutes:

Ross brought up some minor spelling corrections and motioned to approve the previous minutes as amended. Richard seconded and all approved.

Middlebury Energy Report Card:

The Addison County Regional Planning Commission (ACRPC) put together a report analyzing Middlebury's energy use and renewable energy generation. The report grades the Town's progress towards the state's 90% renewable by 2050 goals and the report gave Middlebury a B. Howard noted that Middlebury is doing well relative to other towns and reiterated Steve's concern that the town could also be doing better.

Andrew L'Roe from ACRPC joined the meeting to discuss the report. He said the data used in the meeting is from 2019 and that ACRPC is waiting on updates from Green Mountain Power and Efficiency Vermont. The report accounts for the population and land area of the Town. Richard asked how the goals outlined in the report were developed. Andrew said they stem from the 90 by 50 state goals. It is very rare for a town to get a grade of A or a failing grade. An A- would be in the top fifth of towns.

Steve brought up concerns that the grading in the report is not strict enough and that the MEC has set more ambitious goals than the ones outlined in the report. Additionally, he says the report only looks at energy usage and not the larger GHG emissions picture. Andrew mentioned that Bristol has also argued that its grade should be lower. Richard brought up that the plan for reducing GHG emissions involves electrifying everything, meaning that electricity usage should go up, which is viewed negatively by the report. Andrew said that ACRPC is aware that this will happen. Howard asked how the report should be communicated with residents in order to demonstrate that progress is being made but not quick enough. Steve said that we are ready to address municipal emissions but not the whole Town. Liv said that there are a lot of efficiency improvements the College needs to make to the houses it owns and she will try to reach out to the College. John suggested that there should be a graph with a line depicting the rate of current progress and another line showing where the Town should be to meet the more ambitious goals. Andrew said that the Town should publicize its successes and could put a carbon neutral banner on the Town Offices building, similar to what was done at the College and the Biomass building. Steve thanked Andrew for the work he put into the report.

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Town Report Updates:

Howard explained that this report is assembled annually. Steve added a change to the report at the previous month's meeting. Howard added numbers that he received from Richard. Richard clarified the wording of a sentence. Ross motioned to approve the report, Diane seconded and all approved.

Goals and Objectives for 2021:

Howard brought up that in 2020, the MEC focused primarily on the GHG reduction strategy for municipal buildings and equipment. The MEC has received information from Zach Berzolla from MIT about weatherizing business and residential buildings. Howard wondered if the MEC should reach out and work on efficiency for residents. Ross said that given the number of moving parts and types of energy involved with the MEC's plans, it would be better to get the municipal actions solidified and focus later on the community. Ross is concerned that if the MEC takes on too much, it could dilute the Committee's work. Richard added that the MEC should push through and finish working on the GHG reduction strategy and get the municipal actions started.

Richard mentioned that the Conservation Commission was interested in a comprehensive energy plan. Steve asked if the Conservation Commission and the MEC could work together or if a meeting with the Town Planner is required. Andrew said that this process is more complicated for a larger town such as Middlebury since there is an energy committee, planning commission and a town planner. Andrew suggested that the Conservation Commission work with the MEC on a first draft and bring in the Planning Commission. Howard said that Jennifer Murray and the Planning Commission should know that the MEC is serious about working on this.

Document Repository:

Van shared various examples of repository formats from different committees and commissions. Some use document packets where relevant documents are gathered before each meeting. Others have either a list of documents on the Town website or an attached Google Drive. Several members agreed that document packets would be more work to maintain and difficult to find documents if someone did not remember the date of a specific meeting. The Google Drive option was selected as the best format. Van brought up that a Google Drive for the MEC would need to be viewing only and no editing in order to comply with Open Meeting Law. Andrew said this is what the Conservation Commission does for their Google Drive. Van will put together a Drive for the MEC to bring to next month's meeting.

Updates to GHG reduction goals:

Howard would like to reinvigorate discussions on net metering and the WWTP digester proposals. Dave Carpenter from Green Lantern said that Green Lantern is willing to work with the Town's preferences for solar development, whether it is net-metering or a Town owned project. Howard asked if a digester could be taken off the grid in order to leave the Town's 347 kW of net-metering for a solar project. Richard said that he has not seen an estimate for how much energy would be produced by a digester. Dave warned that digester projects he has seen in the past tend to have a lot of issues and can be tricky to figure out. He recommends working with an established company that has successfully completed projects. Dave asked if the MEC could share the Town's electricity usage trends so that Green Lantern could select an option that best suits the Town.

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Vermont Gas:

Tiana Smith, Tom Murray and Beth Parent joined the meeting to discuss renewable energy and efficiency efforts undertaken by VGS. Tiana outlined VGS's goal of a 30% drop in emissions by 2030 and net zero by 2050. They are working towards increasing their share of gas from renewable sources through projects such as the Vanguard Goodrich Farms digester in Salisbury. VGS has also been promoting weatherization to their customers. Richard asked if the Town could build a digester at the WWTP and send gas onto the grid, similar to a solar net metering project. Tom replied that there may need to be some infrastructure changes to ensure the WWTP gas could enter the system but yes, it is possible. Richard said an all-gas system, as opposed to burning gas to generate electricity, might be preferable to avoid net metering caps. Tiana said that hydrogen blending could help store energy produced from the WWTP during warmer months when demand for gas is lower. Howard asked Tiana what VGS's renewable percentage is at the moment. Tiana did not have a percentage on hand. Richard mentioned that the current EPA estimate is 11.7 pounds of carbon dioxide per CCF of gas. Tiana asked how VGS could help the Town. Howard said the MEC will have an internal discussion and then reach out to VGS.

Updates and Other News:

Howard said that Lisa is teaching at Rikert now and has scheduling conflicts. He asked if there is any flexibility with meeting times. One suggestion is to record the Zoom meetings and make them available to those unable to attend.

Spencer Putnam brought up LiveGreenVT to Howard, which is a guide to connect with people involved in energy and sustainability efforts. Howard will add the MEC to the guide.

The Police Department has received several bids for cruisers, some of which are hybrid. Diane asked if the Town wants the MEC to cover the difference in cost if the hybrid cruisers are purchased. Richard mentioned that if the MEC covers some cost, it should receive some of the savings. Liv said this is the purpose of the Revolving Loan Fund.

Lindsey mentioned that the Town is considering moving the Public Works Department to a new site and constructing a new building. She said this could be an opportunity for a new net zero building.

Richard motioned to adjourn, Van seconded and all approved. The meeting adjourned at 10:36 a.m.