

**Brandon Planning Commission Meeting - Draft
February 7, 2022**

Board Members Present: Ralph Ethier, Liz Gregorek, Jack Schneider, Bill Mills, Robert Foley

Board Members Via Zoom: Lowell Rasmussen

Others Present: Jeff Biasuzzi, Dave Atherton, Bill Moore, Kevin Thornton, Tim Guiles, Jim Hand, Thomas Hand, Bill LaBerge, Mike Bailey, Annette Reynolds

Others Present Via Zoom: Barbara Noyes-Pulling, Lewis Fox

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 6:05PM by Chair – Liz Gregorik.

2. Agenda Approval

A motion was made by Robert Foley and seconded by Bill Mills to approve the agenda, as amended. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Amend the agenda to add MHG Solar presentation as next agenda item.

3. MHG Solar Presentation

Jim Emerson reported he has been doing due diligence in evaluating the MHG project and has spoken with Ed Bove of the RRPC about the ag soils and has reviewed the proposed solar project. There has also been discussion with a number of towns where MHG has installed systems. The town manager of Wallingford had indicated they are great partners to work with. The Brandon Energy Committee is pleased with what they have learned so far and are hoping the Planning Commission will recommend the project to the Select Board.

Thomas Hand of MHG advised he present was to answer questions and take feedback from the community and Planning Commission. Mr. Hand attended Middlebury College and Stanford University and has been building solar projects in Vermont for 10 years. They have developed 15-megawatt systems and have 12 projects in various stages of permitting, not including this project. Their main focus has been in southwest Vermont and currently have systems in Castleton, Bennington, Poultney, Wallingford and Pawlet. A number of projects have been built in old quarries and gravel pits and they are now starting to look at ag sites that are available. When reviewing sites, there is a number of criteria that they look for and in Vermont they look for well screened areas from a visual perspective and if there is visibility, they determine if there is a way to screen it. The next step is to determine what infrastructure there is available for existing roads and power lines. They then consider the natural resources and whether there are wetlands and species to avoid. They finally determine how to integrate the project into the community as their intent is to be good neighbors and want to alleviate any concerns.

Mr. Hand advised this site has a good row of trees along the west and trees along the north and east. There are some small pockets and they are proposing in the site plan to add trees and shrubs to create a visual filter to mitigate the view of the panels. This site is ideal as it is close to existing roads and has a three-phase power line. From the point of natural resources, there was mapping done and ANR has a good sense for the wetlands and there is not a lot of concern regarding species. From the community aspect, MHG was aware that SolarFest was interested in this site and there could be an opportunity to partner with them. MHG would purchase the 70 plus acres; the solar would be on approximately 15 acres; the remaining would be wetlands and a portion of the property would be donated to SolarFest. Mr. Hand stated it is a good opportunity to support a group that will provide training to people on solar. The site is currently a field that is hayed and they have worked out an arrangement with Lewis Fox to bring in sheep to do a vegetative program for them and to keep the field in ag production while also doing energy work. Also from a

community perspective, they will be purchasing the property above the current assessment that will increase tax revenue and the solar project will be based on personal property tax of \$13,000 per year. The project would be selling directly to Vermont utilities and there is also an option of doing net metering for businesses if there is an interest in this. Net metering goes into the grid and the credits can be given to businesses to provide additional savings. The site plan is showing single access tracers in the western fields with trees added along the southern side to screen for some of the houses on the west side. The project would set back 300 feet from Route 73 and trees would be planted in that area as well. This is a preliminary site plan and if the Town had any additional places they would like trees added, MHG would entertain suggestions.

Annette Reynolds, a resident on Route 73, asked how far back the trees will be planted as she does not want her view hindered. Mr. Hand stated the trees would be placed along Route 73 and it is proposed that some trees would be planted on the southwestern side. Ms. Reynolds is more concerned with the eastern side of the property with the wetlands. She wants to continue with her view and would not like the sun shaded. It was noted that the concern is the western property line that serves only to shield Ms. Reynold's house from the project and Mr. Hand suggested those could be removed from the plan if she does not want them. Mr. Hand advised it is proposed to add vegetation near the road and the trees would be planted back and would be what is appropriate for the environment. They have a landscape architect that determines what is best. Jeff Biasuzzi noted concern that there have been projects where the landscape was installed and then forgotten. He asked if the PUC language indicates perpetuity of maintenance. Mr. Hand stated it will have to be maintained and if it dies it will have to be replaced. If one does not remedy an issue, the certificate could be revoked. Mr. Hand noted until recently very few projects have had screening and he has not had any projects that required installation of landscape mitigation. Bill Moore asked if this is their first project with landscape mitigation and whether they have worked with anyone. Mr. Hand reported they have worked with a landscape architect firm. Mr. Hand stated letters have been sent to neighbors of the proposed project. Ms. Reynolds asked how they will recycle the panels and whether they contaminate the soil. Mr. Hand reported for recycling and decommissioning, it is a 25-year project and they have to put up money to the PUC for decommissioning the project. These are steel racking, copper wire and glass panels with aluminum frames. The wire, steel, aluminum and glass are all recyclable, and almost all of the components are completely recyclable. He noted that most panels in the world come from Southeast Asia, with some from Canada and Mexico, but most are produced in Southeast Asia. Mike Bailey of SolarFest stated there has not been a sufficient volume to recycle, but there is a big ramp up in his town and there is a new solar panel recycling unit. The biggest recyclers have been in New Mexico, but for the east coast there will be one in Massachusetts. Mr. Biasuzzi asked about public safety and maintenance, in particular about local emergency response and how the project is maintained besides cutting the grass. Mr. Hand advised the panels are fully enclosed so the maintenance is the transformer. There are invertors that may have air filters that will require cleaning. The only other thing will be thermal imaging scans of wiring to determine hot spots. Mr. Biasuzzi asked what happens if something goes wrong and whether there will be local training. Mr. Hand stated there are breakers and fuses that protect things that would disconnect it from the grid in the event of a lightning strike. There will be a 7-foot security fence so no one should be touching the panels who are not qualified to be inside the fencing. Mr. Hand stated training could be provided if the Town would like it. Barbara Noyes-Pulling stated the RRPC is interested in an MOU with the Town and asked if that is still possible. They heard from some of the neighbors and asked if they have contacted all of the abutters. Mr. Hand reported they identified six neighbors who had visibility, but he was not sure if they have identified all of the abutters. They have not done any of the 45-day notice outreach and in the prior version of the Town Plan, an MOU was required, but it is not in the current plan, but they think it is a good thing to move forward with. Ms. Noyes-Pulling stated they find things go more smoothly if everyone is in at the ground level.

Jack Schneider asked what the next steps would be. Mr. Hand advised they need to be able to submit for the Standard Offer Program that happens around May 1st. The utilities are lumped together and the goal is to get into that program and make sure they have addressed any concerns to assure there are not problems before moving into the permitting process. Dave Atherton asked if access would be from Route 73 or Steinberg Road. Mr. Hand advised due to the powerlines Route 73 would be the best access. Mr. Atherton advised that is state highway and they would have to go through VTrans to get a 1111 to gain access and suggested it would be good to talk to VTrans at the same time about the screening before making the design. Mr. Biasuzzi asked if SolarFest would be sharing the access road and it was noted that access would be from the other side. Mike Bailey stated in addition to the parcel that MHG will use, there is an additional 10 acres that is owned by Elemental and they have spoken to Ron's Auto and Elemental and if there is a

need to provide access, they would be willing to work with them. Mr. Biasuzzi stated the same rules would apply at Ron's, but VTrans likes to be asked first. Mr. Schneider asked if the \$13,000 in increased taxes would be the entire parcel. It was not known what the assessed value was on the property but Mr. Hand noted they are looking to purchase the property for \$230,000. Bill Moore stated the Town has supported solar projects in the past and there are concerns in assuring that enough people know this is happening. Mr. Moore asked if there would be opposition to hearings for people to be made aware of the project. Mr. Hand stated they are required by the PUC to do hearings. Mr. Moore suggested doing the community hearings prior to the PUC mandated hearings. Mr. Hand agreed that was the reason for this meeting and they would like to continue to hold meetings.

Mr. Hand reported these are single-access tracking with the panels facing towards the sun and rotate east to west and do not create glare. The panel is about 40 x 80 inches with a total of 6,000 to 7,000 panels on about 15 acres. Mr. Bailey stated SolarFest is completely separate from the solar project and is a 501c nonprofit. They are very appreciative of MHG's donation of land. Mr. Bailey stated SolarFest will do everything to be a good community member. They are talking about creating walking paths across the wetlands without disturbing the property. They are also talking about doing workforce development classes on this site that they have been doing for more than 10 years. The festival that they host has been done every July. They are happy to have solar panels in their backyard but noted they are a separate company. Mr. Bailey provided a brochure on Solarfest to the Planning Commission members. Ms. Gregorek thanked Mr. Hand for completing the Town's Energy Plan questionnaire. Jack Schneider noted Brandon is one of the few towns that has an Energy Plan.

Lewis Fox of Leicester has been renting the field on the western end of the parcel for 10 years. They have a dairy and raise sheep and are interested in working with MHG to maintain the site using sheep grazing. They do this on a number of different sites in Vermont and New York and is a very good fit for them. They are supportive of the project and are happy to talk about using sheep for maintenance and maintaining agricultural activities. Ms. Reynolds asked SolarFest how much traffic will be with their business. Mr. Bailey stated in terms of traffic, they generally have one weekend a year for the Solarfest festival that is very family-oriented and they will work with the neighbors for this event. They will put signage out and will have volunteers who will help with directing traffic. They work with the local police department and in terms of volume of cars, they encourage carpooling with an average of 4 people per car and the most recent event in Manchester parked 800 cars. It is only one weekend in the year. Mr. Bailey noted most of the festivities will be behind the outcropping. Kevin Thornton suggested creating a link and providing projection for the next presentation. Ms. Gregorek noted she would like to be able to visualize the project and Mr. Schneider volunteered to provide a tour of the area. Ralph Ethier asked where there would be a project of comparable size. Mr. Hand advised there is one in Wallingford that is about 20 acres. Barbara Noyes-Pulling stated it would be the same size as the one near the airport in Rutland. Mr. Biasuzzi stated there is also one in Florence. Mr. Hand advised in other places the developers do the permitting first, however, Vermont is different in that one bids for the standard offer first and then permitting is done at the State level. They want to be sure that they have a project that is viable before moving forward. Ms. Gregorek thanked Mr. Hand for attending the meeting and providing a presentation.

Liz Gregorek asked the Planning Commission members to review the information that had been sent to them on the project. Jack Schneider noted this would be a project that is not in view and Jim Emerson and he have talked with other town managers where they have done projects. Ms. Gregorek noted the main job of the Planning Commission is to assure they are following the guidelines prior to forwarding to the Select Board for a final decision. Jim Emerson advised he has been working with SolarFest for eight months to come to Brandon and they have selected Brandon to be their home. The land will be donated to them that will allow them to develop a workforce training program here. They have highly qualified people to do training and are looking to expand that presence. There is a barn complex on Steinberg Road that Solarfest will have and with the donation from MHG, they will be able to convert the barn for their training center. Mr. Schneider stated the Davenport project is 7 times the size of this project. It was noted 2.2 megawatts is the maximum size one can do without qualifying as a utility. Bob Foley asked if SolarFest is dependent upon MHG's project. Mr. Emerson advised SolarFest needs an answer sooner than MHG's project and the Energy Committee is hoping to move the project ahead. Jeff Biasuzzi stated SolarFest's use of the land is seasonal and temporary for the festival and there will be permits required for the other buildings. The solar farm is exempt from municipal regulations. Mr. Emerson stated SolarFest can do some temporary things this year for the festival and their use only impacts one neighbor east of Ron's Auto. Lowell Rasmussen supports the project as they are making a good

faith effort to address concerns. Ms. Gregorek stated Tom Hand met with Annette Reynolds and will redo the overview of the landscaping. Mr. Biasuzzi stated until the Town sees a formal application to the PUC, it is always in flux and is why it is important that for each solar application that is proposed, the municipality writes to the PUC requesting interested party status. This has to be done for each solar application and if a project is changed for any reason, the Town would be advised. Ms. Gregorek stated the developer did what the Planning Commission asked, provided comprehensive information, and shared information on other projects. Jack Schneider and Jim Emerson have contacted other towns where they have projects to obtain input. Mr. Biasuzzi stated this is a unique project with their coordination with the farm as most projects do not allow for this type of cooperation. Ms. Gregorek agreed and noted it was good that Mr. Fox attend to endorse the project. Ms. Gregorek asked all members provide input to her on this subject by Thursday and she will draft a letter to the Select Board. Mr. Schneider suggested using Mr. Emerson's letter to assist with the draft.

3. Approve Meeting Minutes – January 11, 2022

A motion was made by Jack Schneider and seconded by Bob Foley to approve the Planning Commission minutes of January 11, 2022. **The motion passed unanimously.**

4. Zoning Administrator Report

Jeff Biasuzzi reported there were five applications received since the last reporting period. He received a call from a real estate agent for Dollar General regarding property north of the village. Mr. Biasuzzi reported the Town Office had a waterpipe issue that flooded the office over the weekend. They have been all week cleaning up the office but not a lot of documents were lost.

5. BLUO Review

This item was postponed to a subsequent meeting.

6. Old/New Business

There was no discussion held.

7. Date of Next Meeting

Monday, March 7, 2021 at 6:00PM.

9. Adjournment

A motion was made by Bob Foley and seconded by Bill Mills to adjourn the meeting at 8:10PM. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Respectfully submitted,

Charlene Bryant
Recording Secretary