



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

1 Fenn Street, Suite 201
Pittsfield, MA 01201
T: (413) 442-1521 · F: (413) 442-1523
TTY: 771 or (800) 439-2370
berkshireplanning.org

REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, October 25, 2023

via Zoom

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:03 pm by Christine Rasmussen. Roll call was taken and the meeting was recorded.

Committee Members Present

Malcolm Fick, BRPC Chair, ex-officio; Alternate from Great Barrington

Andrew Groff, Williamstown (non-Commission member)

Kyle Hanlon, North Adams

Sheila Irvin, Delegate from Pittsfield

Kent Lew, Washington (non-Commission member)

Christine Rasmussen, Alternate from Stockbridge, Vice-Chair

Eleanor Tillinghast, Mount Washington (non-Commission member)

BRPC Staff Present

CJ Hoss, Community Planning Program Manager

Britney Daniels, Environment and Energy Planner

Ken Walto, Project Specialist

II. Approval of September 27, 2023 Meeting Minutes

Christine R. read the agenda item and requested a motion to accept the minutes as presented. Kent L. and Eleanor T. each requested minor changes within the text. Christine R. made a motion, incorporating the requested changes. Kyle H. seconded. The motion passed as follows:

Sheila I. - Yes

Christine R. - Yes

Eleanor T. - Yes

Kent L. - Yes

Andrew G. - Yes

Kyle H. - Yes

III. Solar Development and Policy in Massachusetts

CJ H. provided a brief introduction to the topic, including past actions taken by the Regional Issues Committee related to solar development and policy. This discussion included potentials goals and next steps related to this subject. Eleanor T. highlighted some specific comments made specifically by the Committee in the past and their relevance moving forward. Eleanor T. followed with options of how the Committee and BRPC can participate moving forward. The Governor's effort is guided through the newly created Commission on Clean Infrastructure Siting and Permitting, while the legislature is also potentially addressing this topic through Bill H.3215 (An Act to Expedite Permitting for Electric Decarbonization Infrastructure Projects). Both efforts potentially involve taking further control away from municipalities in order to streamline the permitting of projects. Efforts

being made on the legislative and executive side of state government demonstrate a level of seriousness in this work that needs to be tracked.

Britney D. introduced herself and began an informational presentation starting with the state's 2050 Decarbonization Roadmap. This presentation highlighted other work related to the subject. Mass Audubon's "Losing Ground" report estimates that 150,000 acres of land could be lost to ground mounted solar development by 2050, as well as potential land development related to battery storage and other projects encouraged by the state.

This discussion continued to highlight BRPC's focus related to this subject, with a primary focus of solar, battery storage, electric vehicles, and charging stations. The project focus is regulatory process and permitting, long range planning and siting of projects, as well as energy consumption. The goal of this project is to provide municipalities for a toolkit on how to address these topics.

Britney D. then provided an overview of the local regulatory landscape related to the permitting of commercial scale solar, and the lack of clarity of the protections provided to solar given relevant case law to date. This discussion then transitioned into the different methods communities are utilizing to regulate and shape solar development.

Christine R. asked whether communities are aware of the potential for solar development moratoriums and that this might be something that should be communicated as a short-term option for addressing solar development for communities who are grappling with the subject. BRPC staff were not aware of any Planning Boards actively pursuing the topic, but it could be a focus point moving forward.

Andrew G. followed with work in Lanesborough and the Town's efforts to shape appropriate locations for the siting of solar development, especially in relationship to scenic viewsheds. This bylaw is still under review by the Attorney General's Office and will be a proposal worth monitoring.

Britney D. continued the presentation with an overview from the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (Solar Future Study) that attempts to analyze the capacity for solar deployment throughout communities for projects involving: Municipal Buildings, Rooftops, Brownfields, Landfills, and Canopies utilizing parking lots and other impervious surfaces. More information can be found utilizing a mapping tool titled "Massachusetts Technical Potential of Solar."

The discussion transitioned to case studies of solar projects that are currently being reviewed by BRPC staff. An overview was provided of Massachusetts projects in Beverly and Nantucket that involve municipal buildings and property.

The presentation concluded on the key takeaways of BRPC's work and recent grant applications, with a primary focus of understanding community needs and balancing development with impacts of the built environment.

Eleanor T. asked if staff was aware of any specific cost evaluations prepared to understand the differences between rooftop and ground mounted solar, because the current narrative of solar installations within the built environment (e.g., buildings, parking lots) is that it is more costly than clearing forested and undeveloped lands. Staff were unaware of specific analysis, but anecdotally solar developers view ground mounted as the cheapest option. Staff will pursue this topic further.

Britney D. asked if there were any questions or comments related to this work, as comments from the Regional Issues Committee can inform thinking moving forward.

Eleanor T. commented that moving forward, state solar programs should focus on incentivizing development in the previously built environment versus greenfield development.

Kent L. added that speaking in relation to the current economic landscape in the Town of Washington, there are not many opportunities to generate economic opportunity and tax revenue beyond the current largely single-family residential environment. There are also no commercial buildings or other sites that would allow for solar installation. Ground-mounted solar is an opportunity that can benefit the Town and benefit landowners who have well situated properties for careful solar development. Overall, Kent L. did not want to see the potential for greenfield development sites as totally de-incentivized.

Eleanor T. echoed that remuneration for the Town, especially communities who have significant landholdings permanently protected by state ownership, is certainly something to factor into this discussion moving forward.

Discussion ensued that the interconnection costs and state of infrastructure are a disincentive for new solar development in the Berkshires.

CJ H. transitioned the discussion of next steps.

Discussion ensued of appropriate next steps, with several members of the Committee sharing some general ideas. An up to date understanding of where things potentially stand rose to the top, beginning with summaries of what is being proposed in H.3215 and the role of the Commission on Clean Infrastructure Siting and Permitting. Members of the Committee also suggested reaching out to our state delegation to see if any of their policy staff have spent time on this subject and whether they might be available to attend the next Regional Issues Committee meeting.

CJ H. agreed that staff would spend some time on the subject so that the Regional Issues Committee could continue this discussion at their next meeting.

IV. Next Committee Meeting Date – November 29, 2023 at 4pm

Discussion transitioned into other potential topics of interest for future meetings. Christine R. specifically referenced the federal farm bill, and the potential for understanding how we could participate as the bill is renewed every 5 years.

Christine R. asked if there was an opportunity to meet for longer periods of time, when needed. CJ H. said he would poll the availability of membership on different meeting times that might allow more flexibility.

V. Adjournment

Eleanor T. made a motion to adjourn, Kent L. seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 5:17 p.m. after a unanimous roll call vote.