

Energy & Natural Resources Advisory Committee

Minutes

April 26, 2023

Present: Joe Levesque, Chair, *Town of Alstead*; Mari Brunner, Vice Chair, *City of Keene*; Pete Davis, *Town of Jaffrey*; Matt Kelly (ex-officio), *UNH Cooperative Extension Service*; John Kondos, *Monadnock Energy Circuit Rider*; Richard Mellor, *Town of Rindge*; Marge Shepardson, *Town of Marlborough*; John Snowdon, *Town of Westmoreland*; Brett Amy Thelen, *Harris Center for Conservation Education*.

Staff members present: J. B. Mack, *Assistant Director*; Lisa Murphy, *Senior Planner*; Rich Clough, *Office Support Specialist*.

Guests: Deb Perry, (presenter) *U.S Department of Energy, SolSmart Program*; (remote); Barbara Skuly, *Swanzey Energy Committee*.

I. Call to Order and Introductions

Vice Chair Brunner called the meeting to order at 3:33 p.m. and introductions were made.

II. Minutes of October 5, 2022

Motion: To approve the minutes of October 5, 2022 as presented.

Motion by Marge Shepardson, seconded by Pete Davis. Approved by unanimous vote.

III. Community-scale Solar

J. B. Mack introduced Deb Perry, employed by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). and contracting with the U.S. Department of Energy to conduct outreach on behalf of SolSmart. SolSmart is a national program that recognizes and provides technical support to local governments that want to support solar in their communities. Local governments receive free technical assistance and can earn recognition (bronze, silver, gold and platinum levels) when they take action in their communities. She reported that since 2016, the program has helped more than 450 communities earn designation, including Keene and Peterborough, NH. The program was recently extended to 2027 and expects to serve another 500 communities nation-wide. She noted that there are different pathways to achieve designations, including residential, municipal, regional organization, and commercial pathways. She reported that the SolSmart team partners with other agencies including the Interstate Renewable Energy Council (IREC), and her organization, ICMA. She listed many of the benefits and action items that accompany participation in the program including:

- SolSmart can help local governments with no cost technical assistance.
- Participation can help reduce soft costs associated with developing solar.
- The designation program helps entities access funding.
- SolSmart provides clear guidance and templates.
- SolSmart guidance provides more transparency to the process, decreasing opposition.
- Lowering of barriers increases access to solar energy options.
- Community access creates inclusive and equitable policies.

- Some technical assistance with engineering, procurement, system design can be provided.

In the question-and-answer period that followed, Vice Chair Brunner asked about SolSmart's technical assistance and regional staff support. Deb Perry noted that SolSmart provides technical assistance that varies depending on designation level, but there is no regional staff.

Marge Shepardson asked about zoning reviews. Ms. Perry replied that just sending an email showing desire and requesting a zoning review would be enough.

Barbara Skuly asked about training volunteers and what type of time commitment and procedures would a town need to get a designation. Ms. Perry replied that SolSmart does train volunteers and for a town to achieve bronze level status the time can be as little as 2-4 months. The entity must document steps that it has taken (web links, press releases, trainings etc.), compile a list of actions and take new actions among other things.

John Kondos asked if the program offers engineering for communities. Ms. Perry replied that the program does not, but will help with the development of Request for Proposals.

Vice Chair Brunner asked how do communities get solarize campaign support. Ms. Perry said to give SolSmart a call to get support.

John Kondos noted that there is a need to overcome anti-solar zoning regulations that many towns have. Ms. Perry stated that a zoning review would highlight and spotlight barriers to help overcome the restrictive regulations, and that this data, along with national best practices and expert commentary, could be used to address skepticism and support justifications.

John Snowdon asked if SolSmart helps with community engagement, to which Ms. Perry replied in the affirmative. John Snowdon remarked that inclusion of solar energy goals in a 10-year plan was a good way to ensure community support. Ms. Perry agreed and said that towns should use every possible strategy to educate the community.

Chair Levesque noted that most towns would feel that it would be important to have no increase in property taxes as a result of participating in the program. He added that Alstead has a flat \$25 fee for applications. He expressed difficulty in working with utilities. Ms. Perry stated that it is important to engage utility companies through advocacy of local governments. She also noted that it is useful to have examples of utilities that encourage the integration of solar production into the power grid to encourage resistant utility companies.

Ms. Perry also stated that the regional designation allows many voices to be grouped together. John Snowdon asked if SolSmart is working with the Community Power Coalition of NH, to which Ms. Perry replied no.

John Snowdon remarked that net metering is a major hurdle. John Kondos agreed and stated that the utilities are preventing solar from participating in electric aggregation programs.

Vice Chair Brunner asked if SWRPC should engage in a regional pathway. John Snowdon asked if SWRPC has the staff capacity. J. B. Mack replied that staff would need to investigate that question further and noted that connecting towns to SolSmart through a regional affiliation would help towns get to the bronze rating more rapidly.

John Snowdon noted the importance in getting town energy committees to connect to SolSmart since volunteers are spread thin in small towns and it is hard to keep up the momentum.

Motion: To recommend SWRPC investigate pursuing SolSmart's regional designation.

Motion by Mari Brunner, seconded by John Snowdon. Approved by unanimous vote.

Chair Levesque noted that the outside review of ordinances that SolSmart provides is very helpful, but changes in policy are voted on at town meeting. Vice Chair Brunner reported that municipalities could get zoning best practices training, and create an online instant permitting application. John Snowdon noted that including a waiver and reducing taxes at the town level would also help attract more support. Ms. Perry stated that SolSmart could do many of the trainings, workshops, creation of checklists etc. at a regional level, thus creating a broader network of support.

IV. Update on Watershed Projects

Lisa Murphy updated the Committee on the progress of current projects. She noted that the Ashuelot River Watershed project is nearing completion. She stated that work is continuing with the Spofford Lake implementation project while the Swanzey Lake Watershed Management Plan is in its early stages.

V. Other Items

Lisa Murphy announced that she is leaving SWRPC and thanked the members of the Committee for their commitment to the important work we are doing. Committee members thanked her and wished her well.

VI. Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for July 26, 2023 at 3:30 p.m.

VII. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 4:49 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Rich Clough
Office Support Specialist