TOWN OF WESTPORT

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The Coastal Agricultural Resource of New England
Planning Board

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The Massachusetts Energy Facilities Siting Board
1 South Station
Boston, MA 02110
May 30, 2025

Re: Comments on Energy Facilities Siting Board Straw Proposals and Implementation of the 2024 Climate Act

To the Energy Facilities Siting Board,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the **Cumulative Impact Analysis (CIA)** and **Site Suitability Criteria** framework pursuant to the 2024 Climate Act. On behalf of the Town of Westport Planning Board, I respectfully submit the following feedback based on the distinct environmental characteristics of the Town of Westport.

The Town of Westport is defined by extensive coastal resources, critical water supplies, unique freshwater ecosystems, and a strong agricultural base. We commend the Commonwealth's efforts to establish a geospatial, criteria-based framework to steer clean energy infrastructure toward environmentally appropriate locations. However, several critical environmental considerations require greater attention in the proposal to ensure the methodology meets the stated goals of protecting natural and working lands, avoiding sensitive ecosystems, and supporting long-term environmental resilience.

We also urge the State and EFSB to first determine a clear, data-informed understanding of the Commonwealth's future energy needs and how they are projected to change over time. Without a coherent statewide energy strategy – based on projected demand and optimized generation and transmission solutions – there is a significant risk of a fragmented, opportunistic approach to energy development. This could result in a "free-for-all" of project proposals, driven more by developer resources and perceived opportunity than by environmental suitability or equitable community benefit, ultimately leading to suboptimal siting and outcomes.

The Westport Planning Board respectfully offers the following comments with regards to regional environmental priorities that require further consideration within the proposed CIA and Site Suitability methodologies. The Westport Planning Board has its own zoning and permitting requirements with respect to the siting of energy projects, which should be respected within the EFSB's regulatory updates, and local priorities for energy siting are not reflected within Westport Planning Board's comments, as set forth below. The Westport Planning Board has a history of diligent but fair review procedures, ensuring

that proposals mitigate adverse impacts upon abutters and natural resources while also allowing projects to proceed through the permitting process in a timely manner.

1. **Coastal Vulnerability and Flood Hazards Must Be Central to Site Suitability**
   Westport is experiencing accelerating impacts from sea level, saltwater intrusion, and coastal erosion. While "climate change resilience" is a stated criterion, the proposals should more clearly emphasize that the following site characteristics are not suitable for development:
   - Coastal and inland **flood zones**, including 100- and 500-year floodplains to account for increasing frequencies of extreme precipitation events;
   - **Dynamic coastal hazards**, including sea level rise, shoreline retreat, salt marsh migration zones, and CZM Shoreline Change data; and
   - **Drinking water vulnerability** due to saltwater intrusion into aquifers near Buzzards Bay and the South Coast.

   We recommend:
   - Weighting these criteria more strongly in both **Total Site Suitability Scores** and **CIA scoring frameworks**. Particular attention should be given to areas where drinking water supplies or environmental justice populations are at risk; and
   - Explicitly identifying storm surge from increasingly frequent and severe storms as a separate and significant siting hazard within the Site Suitability methodology.

2. **Strengthen Wetland Protections**
   Westport features expansive **freshwater wetlands**, many of which provide carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, and habitat functions.

   Wetlands should be protected at all costs. Any disturbance or alteration should only be considered as a last-resort option. Where impacts are unavoidable, we recommend recognizing wetland replication as a valid but secondary mitigation credit – not a substitute for protection.

   We recommend:
   - Expanding "ineligible area" definitions to encompass **critical wetland complexes**, not just individual resource areas; and
   - Encouraging **wetland restoration** as a mitigation credit under the CIA hierarchy.

3. **Explicitly Safeguard Public Water Supplies and Recharge Areas**
   High-priority drinking water sources are vital to regional water security and are not adequately represented. The loss or degradation of potable water sources poses long-term public health and resilience risks.

   This point cannot be overstated: the future need for potable water will only increase, and drinking water supplies must be treated as critical infrastructure.

We recommend:

- Designating **Zone II/III wellhead protection areas, surface water supply watersheds** and **aquifers** as high-sensitivity or "ineligible" zones; and
- Including these areas in both **site suitability exclusions** and CIA assessments of long-term public health impacts.

4. **Stronger Emphasis on Agricultural Soils and Working Lands**
Although agricultural potential is included in the Site Suitability Scorecard, it is undervalued relative to other criteria. Westport hosts areas of **Prime Farmland Soils** that support ecological resilience through open space preservation, soil carbon retention, and landscape continuity and are critical to local food systems and rural economies.

   We recommend:

   - Greater weighting of **Prime Farmland and Farmland of Statewide Importance** in both the Site Suitability and CIA frameworks; and
   - Consideration of **agricultural land conversion pressures** as a cumulative impact in the CIA.

5. **Address Cumulative Environmental Impacts of Land Use Change**
Southeastern Massachusetts is undergoing rapid landscape transformation due to increasing development pressure, including solar expansion and residential growth. These changes result in cumulative environmental impacts – such as habitat loss, deforestation, increased impervious surfaces, and degraded water quality – that are not fully captures in the current CIA process.

   We recommend:

   - Requiring the CIA to assess foreseeable land use changes that may compound the environmental impacts of energy development, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas;
   - Evaluating cumulative effects on natural systems such as watersheds, forest blocks, and habitat corridors to ensure site suitability reflects long-term environmental sustainability; and
   - Encouraging alignment with **local master plans, Open Space Plans, and watershed-based plans** to inform project context.

6. **Ecological Connectivity and Rare Species Considerations**
Southeastern Massachusetts contains critical wildlife corridors and habitats identified in **MassWildlife's BioMap**, including **Core Habitat** and **Critical Natural Landscapes**. These areas provide essential ecosystem functions and climate resilience benefits and should be consistently used to guide siting and mitigation decisions.

   We recommend:

   - Full integration of **BioMap** priority areas into the CIA and Site Suitability scoring frameworks; and

- Consideration of **landscape fragmentation** as a cumulative impact in infrastructure siting decisions.

7. **Environmental Risks of Decommissioning and Lifecycle Management**
As solar and battery technologies evolve, the long-term implications of decommissioning aging or obsolete infrastructure have become increasingly pressing. Many early solar projects were approved with minimal or outdated cost estimates for decommissioning, often without adequate financial assurance mechanisms in place. Without strong requirements for decommissioning bonds or escrow accounts, there is a substantial risk that future technological obsolescence will lead to project abandonment – leaving cities and towns with the environmental and financial burden of dismantling panels, battery units, inverters, and access infrastructure.
This is particularly concerning in environmentally sensitive areas where improper removal could compromise groundwater recharge areas, contaminate soils, or interfere with habitat restoration goals.

   We recommend:
   - Requiring detailed decommissioning plans as part of the project review process, with updated cost estimates and clear timelines for removal and restoration;
   - Mandating financial assurance mechanisms (i.e. surety bonds or escrow accounts) that reflect the full coat of environmentally responsible decommissioning; and
   - Including lifecycle environmental risks in the CIA framework, particularly in areas with vulnerable resources or prior land use impacts.

8. **Cumulative Environmental Burden of Solar Development**
Westport has experienced concentrated solar and battery storage development, often resulting in environmental degradation such as deforestation, loss of prime agricultural soils, and impacts to local hydrology and habitat. These cumulative impacts are not adequately represented in the current CIA methodology.

   Unlike statutory programs such as Chapter 40B, which set thresholds and limits on municipal obligations, there is currently no cap or regional coordination requirement for hosting solar or battery projects. This absence of limits undermines municipal planning autonomy and can lead to a disproportionate burden on towns that have available land but limited planning capacity.

   We recommend:
   - Including cumulative project density and land conversion impacts in the CIA framework;
   - Evaluating solar and battery infrastructure through a regional lens that accounts for municipal hosting capacity and environmental carrying capacity; and

- Creating statewide guidance to cap or guide cumulative infrastructure siting in any one municipality, particularly those with sensitive ecological resources.

9. **Facilitate a High Comfort Active Transportation Network**
   The Massachusetts 2050 Transportation Plan highlights the need for continuous, safe, and comfortable walking and biking routes. Gaps in active transportation infrastructure limit access to key destinations and hinder emission reduction goals. To accelerate progress, better coordination is needed between transportation and energy infrastructure partners, including utilities, municipalities, RPAs, MPOs, and the MassTrails team, to build a connected statewide network for all ages and abilities.

   We recommend:
   - Prioritizing shared use paths along utility rights-of-way where they can significantly reduce transportation emissions, supporting the state's 2025-2030 Clean Energy & Climate Plan goals;
   - Encouraging improved collaboration among energy project developers, public utilities, municipalities, RPAs, and MPOs to plan, build, and maintain active transportation corridors; and
   - Incentivizing public easements for shared use paths and trails that connect to, or close gaps in, the MassTrails Priority Network, MassDOT Next Generation Bicycle and Pedestrian Vision Map, regional active transportation networks, and local transportation and open space plans.

Conclusion

The Westport Planning Board appreciates the comprehensive approach laid out in both the Site Suitability and CIA proposals. However, to meet the intent of the 2024 Climate Act and ensure that clean energy development supports – not compromises – long-term environmental sustainability, the Westport Planning Board urges the EFSB to adopt a framework that fully integrates ecological sensitivity, water protection, habitat connectivity, and cumulative environmental risk. A strong environmental lens must remain central to all siting and permitting decisions.

Thank you for your consideration of these environmental concerns. We look forward to continuing collaboration to support a clean energy future that respects and protects Westport's and Southeastern Massachusetts' natural resources.

Sincerely,

Jim Whitin, Chair
Town of Westport Planning Board
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