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Comments on SMART Program 400 mW Review

The Belchertown Planning Department has reviewed the proposed revisions to the SMART program and has the following comments. We are not expert in the administrative or other technical aspects of this. Our comments are directed toward the effects on municipal government and land use. Our preface to these comments is that Belchertown has always been a strong advocate of solar energy. We were one of the first Green Communities and our original commercial solar bylaw included more incentives than restrictions. We are the source of five municipal watersheds, including that of Greater Boston, and we take the protection of our natural resources very seriously. Thus, we have some meaningful insight in how the SMART program has fared so far at the municipal level and have constructive recommendations for improvement.

Comments on municipal government effects:

Administrative and board time – Starting in late 2017, commercial solar installers began approaching town officials to discuss their intentions of developing some sites. Initial meetings with staff, and then subsequent submittals consumed both the planning board's and conservation commission's time through 2018 into spring 2019. Over the past two years, the greater amount of staff time was needed to review plans multiple times, address public concerns, communicate with consultants, and work with the developers. Cumulatively, this added up to substantial expense to the community of staff and volunteer time. Other expenses include legal consultation and presenting PILOT items to town meeting.

Residents' concerns – The scale and number of proposals and applications for commercial solar production greatly disturbed many community members. Entire neighborhoods became worried about the security of their properties, not only because of anticipated aesthetic alteration, but equally about the potential for storm water damage from the clearing of tens of acres of forested slopes, and the potential alteration of aquifer recharging that would result from increased run-off and concomitant decreased percolation into the aquifers. This also factored into municipal government directly as staff needed to communicate with

the public, study the documentation provided by them and their experts, research questions, and more.

Effects on municipal planning – All town departments plan their programs and priorities based on what is required of them and how they can improve service to the community. Dedicating a majority of some offices' and boards' time to review rushed, and therefore poorly designed, project applications detracted greatly from the positive work many town offices would otherwise have engaged in. The Town Administrator spent time consulting the town's lawyers, negotiating PILOT agreements, and addressing the public. The Conservation Administrator spent great amounts of time in technical reviews of many plan iterations, site visits, and addressing public concerns. The Town Planner did likewise. The DPW Director had to examine roads and other infrastructure for adequacy, and the Fire Chief needed to review site plans and emergency plans. The assessors would work on the PILOT agreements. Yet, of the eight commercial solar projects reviewed in 2018, not one had begun because of the glut of them in the system. This means that the SMART program's design was such that it caused a rush just to wait, or that much of this municipal labor was squandered in reviewing phantom projects. For towns with no professional planning, conservation, or other staff, the burden of reviewing and permitting these projects is extraordinarily onerous for earnest volunteers who do not have the time nor expertise to adequately evaluate the proposals. Further, small towns fear appeals of decisions because of the expense involved, yet they find themselves faced with appeals regardless of a board's decision – an approved project may be appealed by residents, just as a denied project may be appealed by a developer. The current SMART policy puts municipalities in very difficult positions where resources are being spent on arguments instead of serving the community.

Effects on the town's efforts to encourage responsible renewable energy development – As noted above, Belchertown strongly urges clean renewable local energy production. We have gone beyond the requirements of the Green Community program, are currently conducting a Solarize Belchertown campaign, and enthusiastically welcome commercial solar projects that are appropriate to their sites. What this rush of inappropriately sited and poorly designed commercial proposals has done, though, is cause many residents to reconsider their support and to even reject the prospect of solar development. Instead of viewing solar projects as beautiful quiet and clean contributors to an improved way of life, they become equated with despoiled industrial sites.

Comments on land use effects:

The first round of SMART applications has the effect of clearing large areas of forest, fragmenting one of the larger blocks of forest in the region. This is unacceptable to many in the community who view this as counter-productive to carbon reduction and sound ecological stewardship. The list of detriments includes increased storm water run-off, diversion of storm water and melted snow from aquifers, cold-water stream heating, interior forest wildlife habitat destruction, further spread of invasive species, and a possible result of less carbon sequestration, once plant biomass and soil organics are accounted.

This fragmentation of forest also contributes to the decline of activities that require large undeveloped areas. Commercial forestry is diminished, and pursuits that add to the local economy, such as snowmobiling, hunting, and other outdoor activities are eliminated in those areas. In central and western Massachusetts, these are still popular and viable pursuits for many people.

Recommendations:

Make the “greenfield” disincentives actual disincentives. Developing a forest or important agricultural land without providing some sort of like compensation should be prohibitively expensive.

Make the existing incentives meaningful. Industrial sites, vast parking lots, sand and gravel pits, buildings, and other sites already disturbed (as of a specific date to prevent site despoliation in anticipation of building commercial solar) should be made cost-beneficial to develop for solar.

Provide incentives for solar development on government, non-profit, and religious structures and parking areas to compensate for those entities’ inability to enjoy the tax benefits that for-profit and individual entities do.

If raw land is to be developed, there should be limits on slopes, deforestation, and area with a MEPA-quality evaluation to be done. We cannot afford to eradicate the natural systems clean energy is intended to protect.

If agricultural land is to be developed, there should some demonstration of a farm plan that will be implemented with the solar project. It’s not enough for a board to just be told that the project is going to be dual-use with elevated panels. Evidence of commitment to agricultural should be included as part of the commercial solar development.

Develop a fund for towns to draw from to pay for legal expenses in appeals. This would show good faith by DOER that they understand the towns’ situation and really do want to help and are not blindly promoting solar development regardless of the communities.

Belchertown remains committed to furthering the growth of solar energy generation. We understand we must do our part for the sakes of everyone’s future, and we recognize that some concessions are to be made for the greater good. We hope our experience and suggestions here can help DOER develop policies and programs that will work well for all parties.

Sincerely,



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Town Planner