

Natick Avenue Solar Advisory Committee **September 22, 2020 Meeting Minutes**

CALL TO ORDER

Jason M. Pezzullo, AICP, Planning Director called the *Advisory Committee* Meeting to Order at 6:40pm. Via ZOOM.

Mr. Pezzullo stated that any correspondence regarding the project between Committee members outside of the meeting should be disbursed to all members in order to maintain transparency.

Mr. Berry said that the applicant and their representatives had to present their initial proposal during the first Committee meeting, which took more time than the applicant's team should need in subsequent meetings. He stated that with organized agendas the applicant team will still have a place to speak and present new information, thereby leaving the Committee to deliberate on other agenda items with minimal interruptions.

Mr. Pezzullo stated that a schedule for next steps would be determined at the end of this meeting.

REVIEW OF MINUTES

Attorney Murray asked to clarify that his applicant would like to keep this process moving forward without multiple meetings.

Mr. Berry asked if the Applicant would agree to the transcripts being posted to the City's subpage in order to maintain transparency. Mr. Murray consented.

Minutes of the August 25, 2020 Advisory Committee were reviewed and agreed upon.

SITE VISIT FINDINGS

Ms. Bradford, Landscape Architect, explained that Mr. Rossi drove herself, John Carter and his colleague to the site, she maintained that the site is walkable, and that their primary interest was the buffer area. The woodland area is consistent without an understory of young trees. She stated that the North buffer will be the most difficult to work with, the East buffer has some existing topography and that there is a gas easement to the South that cannot be planted. Ms. Bradford stated that the North buffer was mostly deciduous. Some red cedars within the 50' buffer area will not provide much visual screen, she also explained that plantings would require good light. There should be a designated planting area and there is a need to determine what can be planted to not disturb the existing root system. She went on to explain that the Eastern portion of the project would require a buffer.

Mr. Berry stated that he would like to see a transect line from the property to the east and asked Ms. Bradford's opinion. She agreed that it would be worth asking for an additional transect.

Ms. Patten pointed out that the transects done from her property were done from her barn and not either of the two residences and asked that one be done from each of her residences in order to maintain conformity with the transects from the other residential properties. Mr. Carter expressed that the purpose of the transect lines is not to show every possible vantage point, as this would be impossible, but to give a generally accurate visualization in relationship to the existing and proposed conditions. He also explained that the transect from Ms. Patten's property was from the middle of her property to represent topography changes between the site and solar farm. Ms. Bradford was asked whether she thought Drake's request for revised transect lines on her property were justified, and she replied that she thought they were justified for consistency.

APPLICANT MATERIALS

Mr. Carter explained that after meeting at the site with Sara Bradford, he was able to work with an engineer to provide a 10' wide planting strip between the gravel road and the buffer to be a mix of evergreen and deciduous trees outside the existing buffer in order to integrate understory that wouldn't compete with the root structure or light. When the site is cleared, the Northern buffer will be exposed to more light which will establish a fuller understory.

Ms. Bradford asked that Mr. Carter be more accurate regarding the houses along the North to show that there is no understory for the first 15'. Mr. Carter explained that it consists of a tall deciduous canopy with not much understory and is difficult to depict with transects.

The question was posed to Mr. Carter whether plantings would be proposed as shown beyond the lease line to the Northwest. Mr. Carter responded that yes, plants would be planted up to the edge of clearing.

Mr. Murray reminded the Committee that the discussion with the abutting neighbors resulting in evergreen planting zones "A," "B," and "C," were roughly 18 months ago during the Master Plan approval process.

Ms. Bradford raised the issue of whether one can obtain the desired amount of screening in a 10' planting strip. Mr. Carter responded that the 10' is not purely linear as is the nature of cut lines, and that the 10' would be a minimum.

Mr. Zevon expressed his appreciation for the work on the plans. He raised a concern about the transect lines, suggesting that they be drawn from multiple vantage points. He also requested more details to be provided on the plans.

Ms. Patten asked Ms. Bradford, now that she has conducted a site visit, if she believes pine and red cedar will do well. Ms. Bradford explained that there are cedars there now and didn't see any reason why white pine wouldn't work for the site and stated that commercially sourced materials would be warranted/guaranteed. Ms. Patten also asked John Carter if he had an idea of the specific type of understory. He answered that dense deciduous plants would do well as screening because this lot has been farmed and forested. He also stated that they will be compiling a list and would like input from the Committee.

Mr. Berry asked whether the anticipated growth in the understory due to increased light, would be significant and whether planting in the newly proposed strip would disrupt the root system of the "no cut" zone.

Mr. Carter explained that the edge condition changes when trees that were not previously exposed are now exposed to sun and wind and that after clearing is done there will be areas for pocket planting within the 50' buffer.

Ms. Patten asked if this would require a phased approval and if the clearing has to happen in order to make decisions and questioned how this Committee may come into play. She also noted that it would be helpful to see plans with different options.

Mr. Carter stated that they will have to assess within the 50' buffer once they know where the limit of clearing is, the intent is not to phase in planting. Regarding expectation, plants die and grow at different rates, it would not be practical to conclude upfront without flexibility but it would have to be determined at a later time.

Ms. McGovern stated that she/the applicant would be willing to have Sara Bradford stay on to work with John Carter to keep the City and the abutters needs represented once decisions needed to be made on site consistent with whatever may get approved.

Mr. Berry asked if the applicant would be amenable to a condition to keep Ms. Bradford on at the applicant's expense.

Mr. Murray stated that his applicant would be willing to keep Ms. Bradford on in an advisory role to work with John Carter as a condition of preliminary plan approval.

Ms. Patten asked about the sources for plant materials and maintenance requirements.

Mr. Murray stated that he believed that this discussion was beyond the purview of the Advisory Committee. Mr. Zevon stated his objection to Mr. Murray's comments.

Ms. McGovern referenced Cranston's Code where landscaping maintenance requirements are stated in the Development Plan Review section.

Mr. Berry acknowledged the reference, and stated that it is his interpretation that the Advisory Committee is charged with providing "input and information" to Sara Bradford, and the determination of whether or not the input and information is pertinent will be up to her.

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

Mr. Berry introduced the topic of having a Committee Chair. He stated that he does not believe it necessary to appoint a Committee Chair, that the Committee is functioning without and Jason Pezzullo can continue to moderate/host. The Committee members in attendance agreed.

Mr. Berry raised the discussion item regarding the definitions of "buffer" and "effective buffer." He held that a strict definition is not necessarily the goal, as it will require subjective and professional discretion, but that a common understanding would be beneficial. He stated that there seemed to be a common understanding that a 50' undisturbed area and a fence are NOT an "effective buffer" and that vegetative screening would be critical in achieving the intent of the master plan conditions of approval.

Ms. McGovern pointed out that there are definitions in the City Code and cited several instances where the Code refers to buffers, particularly in the Development Plan Review section. She asked whether it was legally an option to exceed the codified buffer standards. Mr. Marsella explained that the Code sections only apply to Development Plan Review (DPR) applications, and that the conditions of the master plan approval are what provide the regulatory standard in for this Committee, which may be interpreted separate from the codified DPR standards and definitions.

Mrs. Patten asked why the City Solicitor was providing legal advice to the applicant.

Mr. Marsella explained his role at the meeting and expressed that he answered the question to guide the Committee and provide clarification.

Mr. Berry asked to discuss the length of time needed for vegetation to mature. Ms. Bradford explained that they will have a better idea of growth rate once Mr. Carter develops schedule of plant materials.

In the last Committee meeting Mr. Berry stated that he would like the opportunity for an additional site walk, Ms. McGovern stated that Mr. Rossi, Property Owner, welcomed Mr. Berry as a member of the Planning Department to walk the site again but expressed his desire not to open the site walk to the public. Mr. Berry and Ms. Bradford agreed to an additional site walk with Mr. Carter. Drake Patten voiced concern regarding Mr. Berry conducting a site visit without other members being invited. Mr. Berry acknowledged the concern and stated that he would discuss the matter internally before deciding on whether to proceed.

Ms. McGovern went over a list of items that herself and Mr. Carter will supply for the next Committee meeting. The Committee would like to see a revised plan with a general planting list, more details on the proposed additional buffer strip and additional transects from Ms. Patten's residences on her property. Mr. Berry asked for documentation of any agreement with abutters for plantings located off of the subject property.

Mr. Berry and the Committee agreed that the next meeting should be scheduled 10-14 days from receiving revised materials.

The meeting adjourned at 8:51pm.