



Memo

To: Sara Bradford, RLA, ASLA
From: Joshua Berry, AICP, Senior Planner & Advisory Committee Member
Date: October 30, 2020
Re: **Natick Avenue Solar Landscape Plans Input**

Ms. Bradford,

I've provided my input in two categories; the first will be my observations on the landscape plans, and the second will articulate what I think would be beneficial to include in your peer review for the Plan Commission. As staff to the Plan Commission, it's my job to anticipate areas of concern and/or issues that may need exploration/discussion, so I hope my input may be helpful in this regard.

Observations on the Landscape Plans:

Overall, the plans have improved dramatically. As you know, the first initial plan did not propose plantings, but a combination of undisturbed buffers and a 10' wooden stockade fence. We now have planting areas for all major viewsheds (with the possible exception of the view from AP 18 Lot 551 & AP 22 Lot 51), getting much closer to a naturalized visual screen which I believe was the intent.

The maximum height for Planting Area 'D' of 6' is a concern. The height issue was discussed a critical element to the effectiveness of the screen from the south and southeast during our third meeting. I recollect asking the applicant to calculate the point at which the height of plants would become a shade issue for the panels. Mr. Palumbo expressed concern that this could allow for a height greater than what he was comfortable with, but ultimately agreed to return with a figure. To my knowledge, the latest version of the plans does not incorporate the figure. I would like to see this height issue fleshed out with a reasonable regard to both the applicant's and abutter's perspectives, with modifications to the plans being made accordingly.

The viewshed from AP 18 Lots 551 & AP 22 Lot 51 was discussed during the third meeting, but it was unclear whether it would be appropriate for the landscape plan to incorporate further measures to screen the view from said properties. Considering the distance from the property to the panels, the existing vegetation, the topography, the gravel service road and the width of the viewshed,

can you please articulate whether you think the plan appropriately or reasonably addresses this viewshed?

The viewshed from the neighborhood on Ridgewood Road was discussed during the third meeting. The existing vegetation is a critical component of the screen from the northwest, at least part of which is outside of the lease area for the project. I would like some assurance that the owner would not clear the existing vegetation outside of the lease area serving as a screen for the life of the solar project. If, in your opinion, additional plantings would be warranted, those changes should be incorporated into the plans. I recollect Mr. Carter stating that if the area were cleared, then the applicant would agree to do plantings. This needs to be clarified as part of the landscape plan.

A note was removed between the plans with the last revision date of 10/22/20 and the plans with last revision date of 10/23/20. On the 10/22/20 plans, sheet 6 note #5 under the “Planting” section read “If necessary, the trees are to be staked as shown in the planting details. Trees are to remain plumb and shall be adjusted as needed. All stakes and arbor ties are to be maintained and adjusted to prevent girdling of the trunk and removed when no longer needed.” I’m not sure why this note was removed so I just wanted to raise this issue to your attention to address as/if needed.

The authority for plant substitutions was brought into question in the last meeting. You raised concern that the notes on the plans reviewed during that meeting gave Mr. Carter too much discretion. Sheet 6 “Planting” note #7 has been modified to include the language “All substitutions shall be the same planting height and growth habit as the plant being substituted.” I’d like to hear your thoughts about the revised note and whether it satisfies your initial concern. If not, what would you recommend?

Assurances for the site preparation phase would be helpful to clarify. Sheet 6 “Buffer Assessment & Supplementary Buffer Planting” note #1 states “The proposed limit of clearing will be delineated in the field prior to any lot clearing.” Should the note specifically stipulate that the trees to be removed be flagged/marked by Mr. Carter? If you think it’s necessary, I’d simply request that this be clarified in the note.

Recommended topics/issues to address in your peer review:

The anticipated opacity of the buffer is critical regarding whether the plan will be considered an “effective buffer” from the solar project. Expectations were established during the meetings that 100% opacity is not going to be achieved, but I think it’s important for the record to reflect your estimation of opacity in different seasons, at the time of planting compared to several years after, and from different perspectives (the northwest, north, northeast, east/southeast & south). I

hope that your memo identifies where you feel the plan creates an “effective buffer” from the solar project, and, if applicable, identifies any viewsheds that do not meet that standard in your opinion and recommend potential solutions accordingly.

The 50’ x 10’ planting patterns were a new concept for me personally so I think it may be beneficial to include some discussion about what they are, how/why they came about, and what is anticipated to happen in the areas in the planting areas that are NOT areas where planting patterns are proposed.

An overall assessment of the proposed plant species would be very helpful. Many of us are not experts in plants and would have a difficult time evaluating the species listed in terms of appropriateness at this location for the specified purpose. Do you feel that the plant schedule makes appropriate selections? Do you recommend any changes?

The potential for a City selected landscape architect to assist with plan implementation was discussed at the second and third meetings. During the second meeting, Ms. McGovern, confirmed by Mr. Murray, agreed to keep you on the project at their expense to monitor the implementation of whatever landscape plan may ultimately be approved. However, at the third and final meeting, Ms. McGovern stated that she felt that this would no longer be necessary as she believed the reason for your ongoing involvement with the plan implementation was based on the ambiguity of some of the planting details for Planting Area ‘C.’ Ms. McGovern noted that the plans had been revised since the second meeting to now provide the necessary details for Planting Area ‘C,’ thereby eliminating the need for you to assist with the details of the plan implementation. Can you please speak to whether you feel there would be enough value added to pursue, at some capacity, you or another City-selected landscape architect to help oversee the implementation of the landscape plan? If so, would this require changes to the language of any of the notes on Sheet 6?

Long term maintenance and oversight will be critical for the public and Plan Commission to have the confidence that the outcomes are going to be consistent with what may get approved years down the road. Is this something that could or should be part of a potential agreement as per the issue raised directly above, or would you recommend another way to address this issue?

Thank you for considering my input and as well as for your service to the City of Cranston and its residents. It has been a pleasure working with you on this Committee.

Respectfully submitted,

Joshua Berry, AICP
Advisory Committee Member / Senior Planner