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CITY PLAN COMMISSION
Cranston City Hall
869 Park Avenue, Cranston, RI 02910

February 11, 2019

Mr. Ronald Rossi, Owner
1936 Natick Avenue
Cranston, RI 02920

Southern Sky Renewable Energy RI-
Natick Ave-Cranston, LLC, Applicant
117 Metro Center Blvd, Suite 2007
Warwick, RI 02886

DECISION

Natick Avenue Solar – Master Plan
Major Land Development
Natick Avenue
AP 22, Lots 108 and 119

Dear Mr. Rossi:

On February 5, 2019, the City Plan Commission reviewed your Master Plan application entitled 'Natick Avenue Solar' for conformance with required standards set forth in RIGL Section 45-23-30 and 45-23-60, as well as the City of Cranston's Subdivision and Land Development Regulations. This review and vote followed three nights of informational meetings before the Plan Commission and a site visit.

Upon motion made by Mr. Strom and seconded by Mr. Mason, the Commission voted (5/4 – Mr. DiStefano, Mr. Vincent, Ms. Lanphear and Ms. Maccarone voted nay) to adopt the Findings of Fact denoted below and *approve* this Master Plan, subject to the following conditions.

Findings

1. An orderly, thorough and expeditious technical review of this Master Plan has been conducted. Property owners within a 100' radius have been notified via first class mail and the meeting agenda has been properly posted. A display advertisement was published in the Cranston Herald on 11/22/18.

RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(1) states, "The proposed development is consistent with the comprehensive community plan and/or has satisfactorily addressed the issues where there may be inconsistencies."

2. See discussion in Section IV of this report. The proposed solar farms developments are consistent with the City of Cranston Comprehensive Plan through Ordinance 01-17-11. The Land Use, Economic Development and Natural Resources Elements were all amended to include encouragement of renewable energy facilities.



3. Aesthetically, there are many qualities of the project which preserve the rural character of Western Cranston. Firstly, the solar arrays are proposed more than 400' from Natick Avenue behind existing residential lots and a vegetated wetland area, additionally screened by existing stone walls and slope. Therefore, it is anticipated that there will be very limited line of sight opportunities to the project from Natick Avenue unless looking directly down the site entrance or gas easement. No signage is proposed with the project, maintaining the existing character of the roadway. The applicant proposes a Buffer Planting Plan to screen the solar panels from other abutting uses. Modifications of details of said plan can be made during the DPR and Preliminary Plan approval processes to ensure the preservation of the rural character of Western Cranston. The project is consistent with the City's long-term land banking strategy which is intended to preserve the rural character of western Cranston.
4. Ed Pimentel, AICP, of Pimentel Consulting, Inc., provided a report dated 12/3/18 at the December Plan Commission meeting on the Master Plan project application finding that the proposal is consistent with the City of Cranston's Comprehensive Plan and the State Energy Plan.

RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(2) states, “The proposed development is in compliance with the standards and provisions of the municipality's zoning ordinance.”

5. The proposed solar and existing agricultural uses are permitted uses by-right in the A-80 zone.
6. The site is comprised of two lots which meet the requirements of A-80 zoning.
7. The project narrative by project engineer Dave Russo, PE, of DiPrete Engineering states “. . . clearing of natural vegetation will be limited to what is necessary for the construction and operation of the solar power facility” and also that “Top soil will only be disturbed as necessary to provide proper grading for installation of the solar power facility and will not be removed from the site.” These statements demonstrate direct compliance with Cranston's solar performance ordinance.

*RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(3) states, “There will be no significant negative environmental impacts from the proposed development as shown on the **final** plan, with all required conditions for approval.” (emphasis added)*

8. This finding pertains specifically to the final plan. There is proposed clearing and a yet undetermined amount of grading and/or potential blasting. However, the project will be subject to all local, state and federal standards regarding environmental impacts. Further details will be provided if the project moves to the DPR and Preliminary Plan stages of Development.
9. Project engineer Dave Russo, PE of DiPrete Engineering discussed the ability of the solar arrays to run with the existing slopes to the greatest extent possible, as well as the intent of the applicant to manipulate the site as little as possible in order to effectively engineer the site. Mr. Russo's project narrative dated 11/9/18 details and verifies the intent to comply with all environmental regulations through RIDEM and the City.
10. Meadow grass is proposed between and under the solar panels.
11. The Rhode Island November 2018 Natural Heritage map shows that there are no known rare species located on the site. There nearest known rare species locations are roughly 1,600 meters away. This information has been confirmed by David W. Gregg, Ph.D. Executive Director of the Rhode Island Natural History Survey.
12. Solar energy production has an important role in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions contributing to climate change. There are a multitude of environmental benefits (as well as numerous other benefits) to clean renewable electricity as found by the Environmental Protection Agency in their 2018 report, “*Quantifying the Multiple Benefits of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy: a Guide for State and Local Governments.*”

RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(4) states, “The subdivision, as proposed, will not result in the creation of individual lots with any physical constraints to development that building on those lots according to pertinent regulations and building standards would be impracticable. (See definition of Buildable lot). Lots with physical constraints to development may be created only if identified as permanent open space or permanently reserved for a public purpose on the approved, recorded plans.”

13. The project proposes lease areas, not the actual subdivision of lots. No change to the existing lot boundaries are proposed.

RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(5) states, “All proposed land developments and all subdivision lots have adequate and permanent physical access to a public street. Lot frontage on a public street without physical access shall not be considered in compliance with this requirement.”

14. The property in question has adequate permanent physical access from Natick Avenue improved public roadways located within the City of Cranston.
15. The proposed use will not have a negative impact on vehicular traffic, generating only a monthly inspection once operational.

Conditions of Approval

1. The applicant shall use an inclusive approach with the direct abutters to develop an effective buffering plan. The applicant will demonstrate that they have considered the abutter's request for buffer widths, both the understory and canopy so as to appear naturalized, focus on native species and include a mix of maturities, coniferous and deciduous species.
2. The applicants shall submit the Buffer Planting Plan to the Conservation Commission for review and comments as part of the Preliminary Plan process. Required changes to the Buffering Planting Plan (including buffer widths) may result in alterations to the current proposed layout of the solar installations. The widths of the buffers will be required to be as wide as necessary to effectively screen the solar panels and equipment. Required widths may vary depending on topography or other site conditions.
3. Under the provisions of the City of Cranston's Subdivision Regulations Section III (C)(9), a professional landscape architect will be hired by the City to conduct an independent peer review on any and all buffer plans proposed. As part of its independent review, the Commission's landscape architect seek input and information from an Advisory Committee composed of the developer's representative, a Planning Department representative, a Commissioner appointed by the Chair of the Plan Commission; and two representatives of the neighborhood - one of which should be an abutting property owner. The Advisory Committee shall follow the intent of Condition of Approval #1.
4. The applicants shall receive Preliminary DPR approval prior to submission of a Preliminary Application with the Planning Department.
5. The applicant will work with the Tennessee Gas Pipeline to (TGP) to ensure that the project will be consistent with the terms and conditions of the easement.
6. The Preliminary Plan site plan shall provide the dimension of the curb opening on Natick Avenue.
7. The development shall follow existing grades as much as possible, where changes are required, they shall be kept as minimal as possible. In the event of ledge or rock, removal of such shall be mechanical as much as possible.
8. Storm water management shall follow existing topography and utilize R.I.D.E.M. Best Maintenance Practices (BMP's) to ensure conformance to City code. Said plan shall attempt to enhance any conditions (existing and proposed) at, to or near adjacent wetlands and Natick Avenue.



9. As discussed at the DPR pre-application meeting, any transmission lines and/or utility pole relocations within the Natick Avenue Right-of-Way are carefully coordinated with the appropriate utilities.
10. The applicant will demonstrate that they have considered testing of wells of direct abutters (with their permission) prior to any blasting activities and the blasting company (if utilized) will follow the customary procedures for pre-blasting inspections of surrounding properties.
11. Seed mix to be used under panels shall be organically sourced (non GMO or otherwise enhanced seeds) and consist of local seed varieties that would be found in NE meadows.
12. Control of growth under the panels must be limited to mechanical methods. No herbicides or other chemical means may be used to control growth under the panels.
13. During the Development Plan Review phase, the applicant will work with the Planning Department to explore the feasibility of the proposed walking trail as offered in SSRE's letter to Jason Pezzullo, dated January 23, 2019, signed by Robert D. Murray of Taft & McSally, LLP (February Staff Memo Exhibit K).

If I may be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Joshua Berry, MURP, AICP
Senior Planner/Administrative Officer

cc: Robert D. Murray, Esq.