

**NW Regional Energy & Climate Committee
Draft Meeting Minutes
March 20, 2024 at 6:30 p.m.
Virtual Meeting**

Attendance: Al Voegele (Chair, St. Albans Town), Dan Seeley (Richford), Bob Buermann (South Hero), William Irwin (Bakersfield), Mathew LaFluer (Alburgh), Marlena Valenta (NRPC), Emily Klofft (NRPC) and Shaun Coleman (NRPC), Jason Day (Starwind Turbine) and David Howrigan (Fairfield resident),

Al called the meeting to order at 6:31p.m.

Adjustments to the Agenda

None.

Public Comment

David Howrigan introduced himself as resident and farmer from Fairfield. He stated he was concerned about how the energy plan regulating the number of wind turbines a farm can have. Limiting turbines to one per farm would not meet the needs of dairy farmers today or in the future. There may be more advances in technology that farms couldn't access if the regulations limited the number of turbines per farm.

Al thanked David for his comments.

Approval of February Minutes

Bill motioned to approve. Dan seconded. Motion carried.

Review of Draft Feasibility and Challenges Chapter

Bill commented that he was pleased that the chapter addresses difficulties with achieving goals. Marlena added that she did not think this would present a challenge for state approval.

Several points were raised about improving clarity for readers.

Bill requested using a better explanation of the initiatives to put battery storage systems in homes vs. using "grid redundancy" and suggested using "multiple pathways to service areas".

Al suggested moving the section on battery storage up in the chapter.

Bob noted that microgrids could power multiple homes in a neighborhood.

Bill also suggested adding a reference to the hydro section.

There was a brief discussion on renewable natural gas (RNG). Marlena will check the year referenced for the Salisbury project. Vermont Natural Gas offers a biogas option now. The Berkshire RNG project is not on-line.

David offered comments on the chapter. He suggested mentioning the possibility of generating power locally through wind projects and the importance of providing farms with multiple income streams and reducing the need for diesel fuels which is better for the environment.

Review of Draft Strategies Chapter

Marlena presented on strategies noting the Chapter is about conservation and generation.

The discussion revolved around making renewable energy strategies more equitable and user-friendly. Bill proposed that better informing customers on smart rates and peak energy costs would allow them to adjust energy usage for cost savings. Bob noted the plan should recognize that not everyone has the financial means to implement smart meter equipment to lower their rates and it needs to include equitable solutions. Both Bill and Al highlighted the challenges faced by low-income households who lack the resources to invest in energy-saving appliances. Some households rely on expensive laundromats.

Marlena agreed to provide a statement on equity as it is crucial to the committee's work.

Emily noted Kirk's earlier email regarding inconsistencies in transportation data in recap box 5.1 and 5.4. The recap box data has not been updated yet with the new plan data. She and Marlena will explore the data and update the data as necessary.

Bob proposed adding a strategy to train future workers through technical programs in high schools / tech centers. This would address the workforce gap and create career opportunities in the clean energy sector. Additionally, there's a need for better training for existing contractors to optimize system design and potentially reduce overbuilding caused by outdated practices. He used an example of his difficulties in trying to find contractors to conduct home audits and weatherization activities in Grand Isle County.

Marlena agreed to add a separate goal for training programs in high school/ tech centers.

Matthew raised concerns about potential inequities in workforce training programs for renewable energy jobs. He highlighted the importance of ensuring opportunities reach those who have previously been excluded from the workforce based on disability, race and ethnicity. There is a tendency to overlook certain demographics and a need for a more inclusive approach where everyone has the right to compete for these jobs. Collaboration and advocacy are key to achieving an equitable work force.

Jason noted there are significant financial incentives available for renewable energy systems, including grants and tax incentives. Jason suggested structuring a renewable energy cooperative. The cooperative would serve as a business and members (households) would have ownership, essentially receiving free electricity and significantly reducing upfront infrastructure costs. He expressed his enthusiasm for discussing this concept further.

Bill added if that district heating is even more challenging in some ways, then just getting electricity. It requires a lot of infrastructure to move heat from source to recipient structure.

For Goal 3, 4, and 5 there were no comments.

Bill noted there needs to be government led programs, investments, subsidies for public transit. Bob replied that the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) does engage Rail Services, Green Mountain Transit, CIDER, Franklin County Airport and rail trail organizations as part of their purview.

Bill recommended adding a goal for the TAC to reinforce it's efforts to look broadly at transportation projects to include rail and bus service especially those with transportation and health care needs.

Shaun added that the TAC has been trying to build its membership recently after declining numbers since the pandemic. Matthew agreed that there should be more engagement in membership and listed several barriers to volunteering on various committees.

There were no comments on goal 5, 6 or 7.

Jason commented that he and David attended because they heard the committee was trying to limit the number and size of wind turbines on a property and asked if it was true.

Emily stated that a policy exists and will continue to exist on height of turbine based on analysis of conservation areas in plan. The majority of focus has been on location.

Jason said that farmers, such as David, want to make enough energy to power farm operations and then be able to export energy to the community. He noted he doesn't have a problem with the 100-foot tower limit. Farmers are going to want one or two turbines making up to maybe a hundred kilowatts to make enough capacity they need to export.

Bill replied they haven't discussed number and it's more about location. Towns should be encouraged to identify locations where projects should and should not be.

Jason asked if we agree the CPG process is good vehicle to discuss the visual impact?

Bill replied there is a reason we love our mountains and don't have billboards.

Jason agreed then asked if the Committee is going to limit the size of turbines or number of turbines in the energy plan?

Bob replied that committee hasn't discussed that yet.

Jason noted both counties have the type of wind that ideal for Star Wind turbines.

Al suggested to Jason to send his comments to the Regional Planning Commission Executive Director as the committee needed to move on.

Marlena suggested moving mapping methodology section to mapping section of plan. All agreed.

Bill began a discussion on volunteering locally and recruitment efforts at the fire department. He said the plan should encourage environmental, energy and climate topics in schools that excite young people and provide jobs for them in state. The Committee should encourage young people to participate and carry on the committee work that will carry to the next generation.

Al somewhat agreed by saying democracy and youth involvement should start at the municipal level and then build up to other committees such as at the regional level.

Marlena provided examples of working with students at a Climate Camp in Franklin and her personal experiences of being dismissed by other volunteer groups based on her gender.

Shaun mentioned that several schools have Climate Action Committees that would be good to present the energy plan to in order to gain feedback from the segment of the population and expose them to local/regional committee work.

The Committee thanked Marlena and Emily for the work they have put into the plan thus far.

Adjourn

Dan motioned to adjourn. Bob seconded. Motion carried.

Meeting adjourned at 7:49 p.m.