

**SWANTON PLANNING COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING
Swanton Village Complex
120 First Street, Swanton, VT**

MINUTES

Wednesday, November 2, 2016

Present: Jim Hubbard, Chair; Ross Lavoie, Sara Luneau-Swan, Andy LaRocque, Planning Commission members; Travis and Ashley Belisle; Anthony Iarrapino; Reginald Beliveau, Village Manager; Adam Paxman; Dustin & Christine Lang; Penny Dubie; Brian Savage and Marianna Gamache, representatives; Luc Deslandes; Paula Pearsall; Ed Ferguson; Tom Benton, St. Albans Messenger; David Jescavage, Town Administrator; John Smith & Patricia Rainville; Yaasha Wheeler, Secretary.

1. Call to Order

Mr. Hubbard opened the meeting at 7:08 p.m.

2. Public Hearing to take input from the public on the proposed revisions to the 2015 Swanton Town and Village Municipal Plans.

Mr. Hubbard said that the Planning Commission had put together revisions for a “working document that they were comfortable with” that they hoped to present before the Selectboard. He opened the meeting up to the public to make comments on the proposed revisions.

Mr. Iarrapino read the following letter from the Belisles, dated November 2, 2016, in the record:

Dear Swanton Planning Commission:

As the Commission, knows, Swanton Wind filed its application for a Certificate of Public Good in September. While the Commission has acknowledged that its new draft changes to the town plan will not apply to Swanton Wind’s proposed project because Swanton Wind’s application is already under review, we are commenting now because we have participated actively in your process to-date and, more importantly, we are deeply invested in Swanton.

Swanton is our home. We have worked hard to contribute to its economy and tax base. Our families live here. We are committed to a healthy, prosperous future for Swanton

and we believe that renewable energy is part of that healthy future. Our belief is so deeply held that we have invested the better part of our life savings to design and permit a wind energy project that will contribute to the town and be a good neighbor to all, ourselves included.

Throughout this planning process, we have urged you to focus on facts rather than fears. We do appreciate that you have chosen not to incorporate into your proposed draft some of the most outrageous sky-is-falling claims about the potential impacts of a wind project like ours, despite constant pressure from anti-wind activists, some of whom are not even residents of this community. Sadly, however, we see too many instances in your proposed draft where fear won out and facts were pushed aside. This is a disservice to the local community and to the effort to address the climate crisis facing our society; an effort in which we must all do our fair share.

We had hoped that you would have given more consideration to the experience of other wind-hosting towns like Milton and Lowell. To listen to some opponents of wind power talk throughout this process, you would think that those towns have been devastated by the wind projects located there and that similar devastation awaits Swanton. In reality, however, nothing could be further from the truth.

Earlier in the process, we shared copies of a Seven Days issues that featured Milton, Vermont as a thriving community with an up and coming real estate market. Current residents and those seeking to move into the community have become so accustomed to the Georgia Mountain wind project (which is located primarily in Milton) that its harmless presence was not even mentioned in several articles about the town.

Lowell, Vermont, hosts the Kingdom Community Wind facility, a wind project that is three times the size of a Swanton Wind. Even with the larger size of that project and its location on a more sensitive, higher elevation site, the Town of Lowell has had a positive experience hosting wind energy. Richard Pion, chair of the Lowell Selectboard, can see the Kingdom Community Wind turbines from his home. This summer, he published a letter responding to many of the false claims made about life in Lowell by anti-wind activists. The following passages from his letter are especially relevant. Mr. Pion writes:

“[O]f all the terrible things opponents threatened would happen, none materialized. None. Property values have not been hurt, wildlife is thriving, tourism has increased thanks to the regular summer public tours, and the claims about sound mirror the false claims made by [anti-wind activists]. The project was well built and maintained to protect the local environment. Ongoing inspections of the water demonstrate that the mountain is healthy and stormwater features are working.” His letter goes on to discuss the tax benefits that hosting a wind project has brought to the town.

We look forward to bringing similar economic benefits to the Town of Swanton and this region. Based on the experience of the other Vermont wind projects, we anticipate that Swanton Win will make approximately \$150,000 in annual payments to the Town. On top of these annual benefits, sworn testimony for our project’s economist

indicates that Swanton Wind will result in a gain of \$4 million in wages for Vermonters, with most of those wages paid right here in Franklin County. Vermont would also realize a gain of \$392,000 in State tax revenues during project construction. During operation, Swanton Wind will contribute \$175,000 in annual State revenues as well.

Mr. Pion's letter about Lowell's positive experiences concludes with a plea that municipal leaders of Swanton should take seriously. He states: "It is time to stop trying to create angst and fear where there is no basis for it."

Sadly, the fears that have been promoted as part of the discussion around this planning process are too numerous to respond to in one single letter, so we will take this opportunity to highlight the facts on just a few key points.

The fact is that wind energy generation and healthy wildlife populations and habitat can and do coexist peacefully. And just as importantly, wind energy is a major contributor to the fight against climate change, which is the largest single threat to wildlife in Vermont and around the world. For these reasons, respected wildlife conservation organizations like the World Wildlife Federation, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Audubon Society have all expressed support for wind power.

Some individuals have expressed concern about the deer wintering area on our property that our environmental experts identified and mapped near our proposed project. First, we want to underscore that the Swanton Wind project has been designed to avoid all direct impacts to this deer yard. It will only involve the placement of project components in a portion of the 300-foot buffer around the deer yard that is typically recommended by the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife. And we are working productively with the Department of on a plan to mitigate the project's potential, minor, indirect impacts to the deer yard based on the work in the buffer. The mitigation plan will result in the creation of additional winter food resources for deer, as well as other improvements to the way our land is conserve and managed for healthy deer populations. The fact is that deer populations can thrive in the vicinity of wind power projects. Commissioner Lavoie's own experience hunting deer near the wind project in New York is one of many examples of this.

Some have expressed concerns about the impact of wind projects on bird populations, with the draft plan emphasizing the fact that Swanton lies in a major flyway for migrating birds. Here again, this concern is overstated when it comes to wind projects like ours. We had bird and bat surveys done as part of the project's impact assessment and we encourage you to read the reports so you can base the plan on facts, not supposition. Scientific studies have shown that less than 0.1% of all songbird fatalities in the United State resulted from wind turbines. Meanwhile, cats accounted for between 1.4 billion to 3.7 billion bird deaths. Given the emphasis on protecting birds during this process, we expect the Commission will include standards in the Swanton Town Plan that will guide Swanton's regulation or prohibition of outdoor cats. The Commission have also expressed concerns for migrating geese. While we are confident that Swanton Wind will not pose a threat to geese, it should be noted that Vermont is

currently facing an overpopulation of geese with a daily bag limit for hunters of 8 Canada geese per hunter, per day, and between 15 and 25 snow geese in the Champlain hunting zone depending on the season.

During your recent deliberations, some expressed a fear that renewable energy is driving up Vermont's electric rates. Even though this is a matter that goes well beyond the expertise and jurisdiction of this Commission, it is clear from the minutes of previous meetings that such fears drove the debate over removing non-residential scale wind and solar power from the list of "potential renewable energy sources" in Swanton.

The fact is that Vermont enjoys the second-lowest electric rates in New England—for residential, commercial, and industrial customers—according to the latest available U.S. Department of Energy information. And Vermont's rates are lower than those neighboring New York. These low rates have held steady even as Vermont turns increasingly to renewable energy.

The Commission's draft plan also spends a substantial amount of time emphasizing the scenic resources of the town. We appreciate the scenic beauty of those rolling hills, too; we look upon them from our home and our backyard. And we look forward to a time when spinning white wind turbines enhance their beauty by reminding us of how we are harvesting the wind to produce stably-priced, carbon-free electricity needed to address the climate crisis and increase our energy security.

Fears about Swanton Wind's effect on those scene resources have also been overblown. We agree with Commissioner Daniel's honest assessment of the way in which the wind turbines on Georgia Mountain have integrated with the visual landscape of our region when he said that there are some days driving down the highway when he doesn't even notice the turbines and other days when "it's really interesting to watch the things turn."

By proposing to ban certain types of renewable energy altogether and imposing impossibly high standards on other types of renewable energy that go far beyond those imposed on other land uses, this Commission is setting a dangerous precedent. The examples cited above and those discussed with this Commission before show the extent to which a vocal and aggressive minority can spread fear and misinformation to hijack the power of local government and limit the rights of private property owners. We make this statement with full awareness of the results of the ill-informed, non-binding vote on Swanton Wind, recognizing that of the Town's 3,848 registered voters, only roughly 18% of the Town's voters opposed our project. The vast majority of Town voters chose a reasonable course of expressing no opinion on the project, rather than jumping to a conclusion before all the facts were presented.

Ultimately, our concern about the changes to the Town Plan the Commission proposes have less to do with their effect on Swanton Wind and more to do with how private property owners and those seeking to do business in this town can expect to be treated moving forward. Today, Swanton local government is unfairly targeting private

property owners who want to contribute to our community, to Vermont's clean energy economy, and to the global effort to reduce climate change. If the process that got the Commission to the draft you are considering today is any indication, the Town of Swanton has started down a very slippery slope.

Thank you for your volunteer service and your consideration of our comments.

*Very truly yours,
The Belisle Family
Swanton Wind, LLC*

Mr. Hubbard said he appreciated the well-written letter. He did not agree with all the views presented and added that some testimony received by the Planning Commission also disagreed with the views presented. "Swanton is not opposed to any type of development... We've tried to listen to everybody and make some pretty serious decisions on what will go into our plan." The most important thing in the plan is that any renewable energy projects shall keep the credits in Vermont. Many resources that could potentially buy this power were not interested. "I'm not going to say whether I'm for or against the project; I'm just trying to work as the chair" and address such projects in the town plan and keep the information current to the times. He felt that 18% turnout of voters for a special vote was pretty good considering the usual turnout.

Mr. Dustin Lang said that Kingdom Wind pays the municipal taxes in Lowell; he was not aware of Swanton Wind offering that. He said that raptors were in the area, not just geese. Also, he saw flashing lights and loud turbines as a potential stress to the deer in the nearby deer-yard. Mrs. Lang said that, from her understanding of the bird survey done by Swanton Wind, hawks and eagles were seen at turbine height on the ridge. Green Mountain Power said that the only way to keep costs low is by selling the Renewable Energy Credits out of state. Also, residents living near the Georgia Mountain wind project were "not happy" with the project.

Adam Paxman said that, with "large scale industrial anything," he felt that the Planning Commission needed to consider impact fees. Mr. Hubbard said that they would put that on their next discussion. Mr. Paxman added, "If these [turbines] go up 500 feet in the air, we don't have the equipment" to help them if something goes wrong.

Mrs. Rainville said that there had been "next to no discussion" about alternative possibilities for the Swanton Wind LLC project. "There are other ways of going about this." She added that, of the millions of dollars in subsidies to encourage large wind projects, the money could be invested in Efficiency Vermont, which focused on not using as much energy, rather than creating more energy. Another piece that might help was lowering speed limits to get "remarkably better gas mileage" and therefore diminish fuel. Why not just shift the money to other, less potentially destructive projects?

Mr. Hubbard explained some of the things he had seen done in the past to create viable fuel, adding "if we overdevelop renewable energy, we'll see the same thing there,"

resulting in unused solar fields or inoperative wind turbines as the energy needs and technology moved on.

Mr. Reginald Beliveau said that he had reviewed the plan and liked the way it read and its appeal for business and residents. He understood the Belisles' position, but Swanton had some of the lowest energy rates in the state. "Because of these large scale renewable projects out there, we're told to curtail running the hydroelectric dam" and are forced to buy energy from other utilities.

Mr. Iarrapino responded to some of the comments. He said that it was true that the scientists hired by the Belisles' to study the project did see raptors in the area, but the experts have also spent hundreds of hours studying wind turbine projects throughout New England. "Just because the birds are there does not mean they will fly into the blades." The state was also currently "overrun with deer." He recommended relying on experts in terms of what was acceptable for deer. He added that natural gas, oil, and nuclear power would not exist without subsidies, and the wind project was economical viable even without some of the available federal subsidies. Efficiency was important, but just being more efficient was not going to be enough, especially since Vermonters traveled more than a lot of people in other state. Many energy sources were polluting. He compared the high dangers of nuclear plants to the low dangers of wind turbines.

Mrs. Gamache pointed out that not all renewable energy generation facilities worked well in low temperatures, adding that the chairman of the Natural Resources and Energy Committee said that, "This [renewable energy source] is all great stuff, and you should all do it, but don't disconnect your conventional system, because when your temperature goes down far enough, you're going to need to have that system."

Mr. Hubbard agreed that diversity in energy sources was important. "This is the toughest thing I've been involved in for Swanton over the years... I would hate to see us be a community that gets stapled with something for the next 25, 30, 40 years and maybe 3 to 5 years from now, a whole change in renewable energy comes forth that could have a better impact on the community of Swanton." The Swanton Wind project had already been submitted to the Public Service Board. "I wish the Belisles well, whether it goes forward or not."

Mr. Lavoie said that the public input over the last year has been very helpful. "Typically, it's just five of us sitting there talking about things... Hopefully this gets more people involved and has people coming to our meetings to reasons other than one specific project." He thanked everyone for coming.

3. After the close of the public hearing, the Planning Commission will consider approving the revisions to forward to the Selectboard for approval and adoption.

Mr. Hubbard made a motion, seconded by Mr. Lavoie, to approve the proposed additional text to the Swanton Municipal Plan regarding renewable energy and to forward those proposed revisions to the Selectboard for review. Motion carried.

4. Adjournment

Mr. Jescavage announced that the Targeted Area-Wide Plan Committee for the Northern Gateway redevelopment would hold a meeting tomorrow at 5:30 p.m. at the Town Offices. The consultant would present what he had assessed so far.

The next meeting would be held on December 14, 2016, at 7 p.m. at the Town Office. They would discuss the Zoning Administrator's proposed revisions to the Zoning Bylaws.

Mrs. Luneau-Swan made a motion, seconded by Mr. Lavoie, to adjourn at 7:53 p.m. Motion carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

Yaasha Wheeler
Planning Commission Secretary

Jim Hubbard

Ed Daniel

Ross Lavoie

Andy LaRocque

Sara Luneau-Swan