

Minutes, Bennington Energy Committee

May 19, 2020 7 p.m. via Zoom link

Present: Michael Kuser, Wendy Sharkey, Bruce Lierman, Deanna Oakes, Jeannie Jenkins, Nancy Thompson

Advisory members: Madison Kremer, David Durfee, Bill Christian

Guests: Rep. Jim Carroll

The meeting was called to order at 7:04 p.m.

The first order of business was to review the February minutes. Bruce moved to accept the minutes, and Jeannie seconded. It was pointed out that McLeod is misspelled in the minutes; the minutes will be corrected to reflect the proper spelling. Michael Kuser's name will also be corrected for spelling. The committee moved to accept the minutes with corrections.

Discussion ensued about adding agenda items. Deanna asked to add an agenda item to discuss possible meeting time/day changes for fall. It was noted as a possibility for fall, but not added to the agenda for tonight. Instead, the committee will revisit the issue in the August meeting. Madison then asked if she could be added to the agenda to provide updates. The committee agreed.

The committee moved on to review the town building energy audits. Jeannie discussed the information that was provided to members. Mark Sawyer met with Jeannie and provided substantial information about the energy plan for every building that the town owns. Jeannie noted that the relationship between Efficiency Vermont and the town is excellent and a two-way street. Jeannie noted that outside of the rec center (little work has been done there on upgrades), there is a very solid plan for all the town buildings. Until the situation with the UCS/rec center is sorted out, the town does not want to do anything to the building because it is unsure what the building's future is and because there needs to be assurance that any work done will be appropriately sized. At this point, the town is generating more electricity than it uses.

Brief discussion was held on how COVID is currently affecting town revenues. Discussion was also held around the progress being made by the town. Jeannie noted that progress is continual, and that the best way to encourage the town to keep making progress is to acknowledge the progress made and to ask how we can help with additional endeavors.

The next item was review of state legislation. Wendy provided an overview of legislative actions. One bill (H63) passed and provides additional funding for energy efficient measures. Another, S163, has been passed by the Senate and is in committee; it may be of use down the line regarding rental properties. It was noted that over 100 homeless families are currently being housed in motels in the area. Because of COVID, there has been a move away from shelters, creating a need for low income housing that is not substandard. Efficiency Vermont may be rolling out programs in the next week or two aimed specifically for landlords. Going forward, the committee may find it useful to work with landlords on weatherization issues. Madison Kremer is willing to connect the committee with Shires

Housing in an advocacy capacity. Wendy notes that S163 contains language pertaining to contractors. A committee member pointed out that at a local level, the process would be simplified if contractors were certified for energy efficiency. The role of Neighbor Works in that area was explained. Rep. Carroll was asked to see if there is any advocacy the committee might be able to provide on the housing bill.

Rep. Carroll left the meeting but gave the committee a phone number to contact him (802-733-2061). He stressed that anyone struggling as a result of the pandemic should also feel free to contact him.

A point was raised that it would be helpful to make green building more attractive as an option for both consumers and builders. It was suggested to bring in BROCC to find out why this is the only area in the state that does not have a waiting list for weatherization and green retrofitting.

Regarding other committee updates, Michael stated that he had a good experience with his contact at Green Mountain Power. He provided an overview of his conversation and what he learned as a result. Michael had previously provided detailed information about the conversation to committee members via email. Michael noted that various rebates are available for certain purchases such as electric lawnmowers and e-bikes. People discussed various ways to help people learn about products such as e-bikes and ways to promote them. GMP stressed that once measures are put in place, they continue to provide benefits at no additional costs.

On the topic of focus recommendations to Select Board, Jeannie noted that we picked a couple of areas to research that matched the focus areas. She wondered if we have covered all the recommendations at this point, or if there are other areas that we want to research. Michael suggested that the energy committee can be useful by publicizing ways to save energy and to encourage energy efficiency and climate awareness, and by making recommendations to the town as appropriate. Jeannie clarified that she was asking whether we are at a point yet as a committee that we are ready to advise the town on which of the areas we see as most vital for the town's efforts. Michael offered that our recommendations should focus on energy efficiency, weatherization, and campaigning and advocacy. Bruce pointed out that the committee may also have a role in recommending to the town that we keep the lines of conversation open around improving rental housing stock and discovering what the barriers are to improvement. Jeannie reviewed the committee's charges and advised that we need closure on where we go from this point. Wendy pointed out that most of the evening's conversation has been focused on weatherization, and that has to be one of the major considerations. Madison suggested providing specific suggestions for implementation of the action points we define. Jeannie suggested doing a deeper dive around issues of weatherization and housing stock. Discussion ensued about how to create action items and at what level. The possibility of inviting BROCC was discussed. Madison offered to invite BROCC contacts to the next meeting.

Madison Kremer advised that she has been meeting with energy groups from all around the state. A recent meeting focused on how to move forward with any kind of energy action in the time of COVID. Window Dressers program is in limbo as to whether it will be expanding next year. She will be meeting next week to talk about the idea of webinars. She brought up the ideas of mentorship, the BCRC event, and the BAM bike event coming up.

Bruce informed the committee about the groups Green Island and PROUT and the work they do at the committee level. They are very interested in VT because of the work VT and BCRC have done on mapping. The possibility is an integrated technological energy and waste net zero solution for select

areas. Bruce will provide updates in future. Bruce also noted that his intro level program on Bike Fit will be Thursday at 6 pm.

Public comment: David stressed the importance of getting townspeople involved. Without the buy in of town residents, plans will not be as successful. Additionally, we need to cultivate awareness of energy applications in the federal stimulus package. Bill Christian noted that he had volunteered to look into the energy standards. He reported that in VT, contractors self-certify that work is energy efficient, and Bill pointed out that in VT one does not need any certification to be a contractor. He has no idea if contractors are working with Efficiency Vermont to self-certify.

Wendy Sharkey suggested a homework assignment for all of us:
Each of us was asked to come up with 3 action items to move weatherization/improvements to housing stock forward. If people preferred, they could choose another priority area to focus on.

The June 16, 2020 meeting was set for 7-8:30 pm. The committee will meet via Zoom.

Bruce moved to adjourn. The meeting was adjourned at 8:40 p.m.