

City of Keene
New Hampshire

ENERGY AND CLIMATE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, February 7, 2024

8:00 AM

**2nd Floor Conference Room,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Zach Luse, Chair
Paul Roth, Vice Chair
Councilor Raleigh Ormerod
Councilor Bryan Lake
Jude Nuru
Diana Duffy
Clair Oursler
Kenneth Swymer Jr. Jr.
Charles Redfern, Alternate
Rowland Russell, Alternate

Staff Present:

Megan Fortson, Planning Technician

Members Not Present:

Lisa Maxfield
Michael Winograd

1) Call to Order and Roll Call

Chair Zach Luse called the meeting to order at 8:04 AM. Mr. Charles Redfern joined via Microsoft Teams. Chair Luse invited Mr. Rowland Russell to participate as a voting member.

2) Approval of Minutes

Chair Luse welcomed comments on the minutes. With no comments, he requested a motion to approve the minutes. Councilor Bryan Lake motioned to approve the minutes of January 3, 2024. Mr. Kenneth Swymer Jr. seconded the motion. With no discussion and all in favor, the minutes from January 3, 2024, were unanimously approved.

3) Participation in the 2024 Earth Festival

In a prior meeting, the group had decided to participate in the 2024 Earth Festival on Saturday, April 20, 2024, put on by the Monadnock Food Co-op. Chair Luse explained that there is an application due March 1st and work needs to be done around the recruitment of volunteers. The festival is set to occur during school vacation week. He will not be around and wondered if anyone would be interested in leading that effort. He explained that supplies needed for the tabling would

need to be picked up during business hours ahead of the event. It would also require organizing coverage of volunteers for the day. Mr. Paul Roth asked what the hours were of the event. Chair Luse responded that it usually runs from midday to 4:00 PM. Mr. Russell said it was either 11:00 AM or 12:00 PM to 4:00 PM.

Chair Luse requested a volunteer to fill out and file the application and another to organize the event. Mr. Swymer offered to fill out the application, but explained that he would also be out of town on the day of the event. Chair Luse offered to forward Mr. Swymer the form. Councilor Bryan Lake shared that he would also be out of town, but was willing to put together a form or Google sheet to organize the volunteers.

Mr. Paul Roth asked what the purpose of the event and advertising was. Chair Luse explained that the intent is like Clean Energy Week and its purpose is mainly informational. Information and handouts will be provided on the energy plan, community power, and to increase general awareness. Mr. Roth asked if there would be another survey, to which Chair Luse responded no.

Ms. Diana Duffy thanked Mr. Roth for asking for the purpose and suggested developing a short paragraph about the Energy & Climate Committee. Mr. Roth suggested an elevator speech. Ms. Duffy also suggested utilizing a QR code linked to the website rather than handouts to reduce waste. Having a membership thread might also be useful.

Chair Luse shared that he typically just gives a brief explanation of what the ECC is and provides some of the key points of things the group is doing, such as the goals of the energy plan, promoting solar vehicles, and community power. He believed a QR code would be easy to do and shared that another thing they have done in the past is to encourage people to sign up for the energy newsletter. There were usually about a dozen people who signed up for the newsletter at each event.

4) Climate Café Event

Chair Luse shared that the Climate Café event will take place on Thursday, February 15, 2024, at the Keene Public Library. The topic of the event is Climate, Land and Water.

5) Update on the Downtown Infrastructure Project

Chair Luse welcomed Don Lussier, City Engineer. He shared that they are in what they call the “preliminary design phase” of the downtown project. Previously, they were participating in conceptual planning to determine what they wanted to build and to get the big picture of what residents want downtown to look like. That phase provided a broad outline. The preliminary design phase will go into more detail. In the previous phase, it was decided that they wanted bike lanes. In this next phase, they will delve deeper into the details and decide on the grade of the sidewalks, how they want to delineate them and separate them from the pedestrian space, how they want to colorize or texturize them, how to illuminate them, and all those much more nuanced details that have not been decided up to this point. He explained they expect this phase to last through July or August.

Mr. Lussier explained that the biggest piece of work they are focused on right now is a grant application to the United States Department of Transportation (US DOT). This application is for a RAISE (“Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability & Equity”) grant, which is a large transportation grant that previously called “Tiger,” and later “Build.” There have been various iterations on which every administration has put their stamp. The current administration has focused this grant on sustainability and equity. It is a grant program that looks at how to use transportation investments at the federal level to create sustainable solutions that produce economic benefits and drive equitable outcomes for the community. Currently, the consultants are focused on that heavily as it is due at the end of this month.

Mr. Lussier explained that one team is doing that grant application and all the work to support that while another part of the consulting team is working on the preliminary design concepts with/through public outreach. They currently have scheduled three separate public outreach meetings or public design workshops over the next three months on March 6th, April 3rd, and May 1st with each one having a specific focus area. On March 6th, the focus will be the Main St corridor and streetscape. For April 3rd, they will focus on the Railroad Square and Gilbo Avenue area, which is currently planned to be a raised intersection, and will look at what is wanted for public space for community events and street furnishings.

The May 1st session will focus on Central Square. A week after each one of the public workshops, there will be a special meeting held with MSFI (anticipated to occur on March 13th, April 10th, and May 8th). Those will serve as a time to report back to the MSFI committee about what was heard in the public meeting, to get their input on what the public is saying, and to provide an opportunity for them to intervene should they see a need. This will be followed up on June 11th (tentatively) with a City Council workshop, which would serve as a mid-design opportunity for the City Council to weigh in on the process to date, provide direction, receive input from the public, and discuss what they would like to see in the preliminary design.

Mr. Lussier stated he had some specific things he wanted to talk to the ECC about. In particular, the topic he wanted to discuss today is lighting. The City Manager has been clear that she expects the project to incorporate solar lighting. He stated that as the engineer who is going to make that work, he is a little concerned about the desire for solar lighting the desire for street trees and those two things being at odds. He shared that they are currently looking at some manufacturers and discussing with them ways to bridge the tree canopy while still getting adequate sunlight for the solar fixtures. Whether that is feasible or not is still a question, but it is being investigated.

Mr. Lussier went on to share that he came hoping to get some input from the group. He asked the group if the city were to put forth a proposal for a centralized solar plant for a larger solar project (say at railroad square for a solar canopy) and sized it to offset the energy demands of the downtown lighting, whether that would meet the community’s goals. Chair Luse responded that he thought it was more efficient and less wasteful and provided the scale. He stated that putting a solar panel on every single light is not an efficient way to do it. Better results can be achieved by having solar off-site. From the solar lights he saw (including the ones at the new roundabout on Winchester St), he believes that they do not work as well, especially with the dreary winter weather and shorter days.

Mr. Lussier responded that he found that interesting and would love to talk more to Mr. Luse offline about specifics. He explained that those lights are designed to decrease the lighting level after 11:00 PM, but can also be programmed to operate differently. He believed it may be a programming issue if they are not producing enough light. Those lights are designed to be dark skies friendly. He explained that it may be a perception difference in that when looking down the street, the luminaires are not visible. It may be perceived to be dark due to the lack of a visible light fixture.

Chair Luse recognized Mr. Russell. Mr. Russell said he is aware Jeff Skelter and the arts community are still interested in the arts corridor with the covered pavilion potentially being used by the Farmer's market. He believed that would be an excellent place for solar panels on top.

Chair Luse recognized Mr. Peter Hansel. Mr. Hansel stated that as someone who has been very vocal about the need for trees downtown and involved in the solar projects in the city, he would second what Mr. Luse said. He stated that electrons are easy to move; trees are not. He suggested finding a place where there is good solar exposure and trying to get the electrons from there rather than trying to site them downtown and possibly reducing the value of downtown. Mr. Lussier thanked Mr. Hansel for his input.

Mr. Swymer added that as Mr. Lussier was talking about bridging the tree canopy with the solar fixtures with the luminaires down below, he did not think that would look particularly good. He agreed that placing the solar off-site (as others had suggested) would be a better option. Mr. Lussier thanked him for his input.

Mr. Hansel stated that he agreed with the City Manager that the lights should be solar-powered and suggested messaging to that effect. The location of the solar array is less important because it is all net metering.

Mr. Lussier addressed the Chair and stated that as part of the grants he mentioned previously, they are required to obtain and submit letters of support from different organizations and community groups. The federal government wants to know that there is broad community support for the investment they are making. If this is something the committee could support, he would love to get a letter from the ECC supporting the downtown project. Chair Luse responded that previous letters around this project have been focused on the sustainability and equity piece, which lines up well with the grant. He asked if there were any key things Mr. Lussier would like to see addressed in the letter. Mr. Lussier said if it were something that the group would support, he would be happy to send a template letter.

He suggested they tailor it to say why this project is of specific benefit to this committee. Mr. Roth asked if it would be beneficial to show how long the committee has been in existence and thought it would be beneficial to show its legacy and how the group has followed through. Mr. Lussier agreed and explained that RAISE stands for Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity. Sustainability is right in the name, so that is a big focus of their grant application and the solar serves as an example of how they are putting that into practice. Mr. Lussier asked if there was a deadline by which this was needed. Mr. Lussier responded that they

need it by February 16th. The grant submission deadline is February 28th, but they need time to bundle it all together and upload it to the federal grant database.

Mr. Redfern asked Mr. Lussier if he had considered asking the Bicycle Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee for a letter of support. Mr. Lussier shared that they are on the agenda for the next meeting. Mr. Russell asked if bike lanes would be discussed on March 6th, which Mr. Lussier confirmed.

Councilor Bryan Lake offered to help Chair Luse write up the letter and moved that the chair write a letter of support for the grant funding application. Mr. Paul Roth seconded his motion. With no discussion and all in favor, the motion was approved.

Councilor Ormerod asked Mr. Lussier to specify the time and location for each of the meetings. Mr. Lussier said there will be press releases made both in advance and on the day of each of the separate meetings. He believed the times were 3:00-4:30 PM and 5:30-7:00 PM and they would be held in the Parks and Recreation Building in room 14.

Chair Luse asked Mr. Lussier if there was anything he could share about the conversations he was having with Liberty Utilities. Mr. Lussier said he could share that they have had conversations and that they were not laughed out of the room. He believed they took Liberty a bit by surprise and said he believed, “they did not think they could put the camel’s nose under the New Hampshire tent.” He said he believed they were already doing this in Massachusetts and New York. They are interested, but there are some large questions about whether they can do this under state law under their existing public utility charter. There is concern that New Hampshire state law might put their charter at risk, which would be a non-starter for them. It may end up moving forward, but only after legislative action of some kind is taken.

His best guess is that it would not happen in time for the 2025 construction season. They are currently scheduled to start construction in the square in 2025. As far as he sees, the Liberty processes are going to be complicated, but there is potential for the later phases of the project. Chair Luse asked if Clean Energy New Hampshire could help with the legislative piece. Mr. Lussier responded that in terms of advocacy, yes. However, he believed the ball to currently be in Liberty’s court to figure out what New Hampshire law would allow. He explained that they met with them specifically about the geothermal district heating system. Mr. Lussier said he believed the conversion of gas from the propane air mix to the natural gas was going to happen, but was just a matter of timing. With no other discussion, Mr. Lussier thanked the group and excused himself from the meeting.

6) ECC Workgroup Report Outs

With Mari out, Chair Luse said he would try to remind people to submit their report-outs, but asked people to do their best to get them in.

A) Community Solar

Chair Luse recognized Mr. Jude Nuru and invited him to share his report out. Mr. Nuru said they had three major highlights. The first is that they are working with Clean Energy New Hampshire to have an in-person workshop where they can talk to people about the community and their coaching program. Secondly, they are working with the Monadnock Sustainability Hub to get the Greater Keene/Peterborough Chamber of Commerce to also have additional publicity about the program. Lastly, they are assessing the City sites. There is a potential grant opportunity for New Hampshire municipalities for up to 60kW AC solar. He believes this is something they could help with and plans to bring it to City Staff to see if it makes sense for the workgroup to assist the staff in applying for that grant.

B) Grants, Fundraising and Partnerships

Mr. Redfern shared that he has had some conversations with AmeriCorps that have been quite successful. The director of the Northeast AmeriCorps Program is excited to see if the City of Keene is serious about being a host site for a Vista AmeriCorps volunteer. This has been “informally and preliminarily endorsed” by Volunteer New Hampshire, which would be the liaison for AmeriCorps, should the City decide to move forward with this.

They collected the job descriptions, as well as other material, and Ms. Beth Campbell has put them into a document on the Google site. At this point, he has all the information he could foresee needing to put before the City decision-makers. As the document is quite long, he would like to produce bullet points with paragraphs as to the contacts that he has been involved with who have spoken favorably of this.

AmeriCorps offers a stipend to their volunteers, which is about \$13,000 per year. It is a one-year term, and they also offer housing assistance in many cases, along with tuition assistance for those with federal student loans. If the City can augment its fund with some additional funding, which he has heard that they do have, he believes they could put something together that would be enticing to a bachelor's degree scholar. He is hopeful they will find someone to work for one year with the City to develop its implementation plan and get started on the grant writing. Concurrently, they could get some fundraising going for the program and its implementation.

Mr. Redfern wants to take the previously-mentioned high-points document and provide that to the workgroup for input. It would then get moved through the Community Development Department and up to the city manager. Mr. Redfern asked if Chair Luse had any direction or anything he needed from Mr. Redfern at this point. Chair Luse responded that he thought they needed a clear outline and recommendation from the work group for the discussion by the committee. Mr. Redfern agreed to include that. Chair Luse wondered if it would make sense to have AmeriCorps speak to the committee on this. Mr. Redfern responded that they could do it through a Microsoft Teams meeting and agreed to see what he could do on that end.

Mr. Roth asked Mr. Redfern to confirm that they were not reinventing the wheel and that this had been done in other communities. Mr. Redfern confirmed that they had and that Portland, ME is

one community that is highly active in this. There is another group in South Portland, ME that has four volunteers that work for various towns. The volunteers are replaced every year when their term runs out. In some cases, they become employees of the City while others move on. Chair Luse thanked Mr. Redfern for his work on this.

C) Education and Outreach

Chair Luse shared that the sponsorship request for the Energy Expo at the airport is going before the PLD committee tonight. He is planning to attend and advocate for that. As the workgroup has focused on the energy expo, there is not much to update on. It is still in the preliminary stages beyond just the sponsorship.

D) Legislative Tracking

Councilor Bryan Lake shared that due to some scheduling conflicts on his part, they were not able to meet, but they did just recently receive a call-to-action from New Hampshire Clean Energy on a couple of bills. There are two bills in front of the Senate and the hearing is today. One bill, SB373, is to adopt the updated 2021 building code rather than the 2021 energy conservation code (which is intended to remain in the 2018 version unless amendments are made). Another bill, SB437, is a bill that by his understanding, would unnecessarily make municipality updates to the building code far more tedious than they need to be. He was not sure what the intent was there, other than to potentially take control from the municipalities by making it more difficult to amend the building code at the local level. If anyone is interested, support or disapproval can be voiced via the Senate website. He is happy to forward the Gencorp Senate website to those interested.

Councilor Ormerod offered to add to the rationale behind the energy portion being excised from the legislation. He had a half-hour conversation with Mr. Med Kopczynski about this on the radio about two weeks ago. During their conversation, Mr. Kopczynski explained that when they did the analysis, it was an 11% improvement in energy efficiency and at great cost. They wanted to recommend that the board take that out. The gains did not seem to be worth the cost at the time, especially given the plan and the need to build more housing in the state. It is either an economic model problem or a building product problem concerning energy, which is why they were not able to get the energy code adopted this time.

Chair Luse shared that last year, they had someone come and speak about the issue with the building companies. He believed they were basing those numbers off the Home Builders Association, which were of questionable origins. There were two studies, one from the Department of Energy specific to housing and New Hampshire, which showed that the cost was far less than what the Home Builders Association was saying. Councilor Ormerod said that was the economic problem that he sees.

E) Food Security

Mr. Russell shared that they had their meet-up with the farmers at Modest Man, which went well. The theme was economic sustainability for farms, and they received great input from people. They are still consolidating and cleaning up the notes. Those will be sent back out to the farmers and farms that attended, as well as the ones that were not able to attend in an effort to allow for more input.

The workgroup has been looking at what their next focus will be, which will be climate resilience and conservation measures for the larger food system, not just farms. They are not sure of the format for it yet. They also want to do one that will focus on food waste and composting, including looking at the potential for commercial composting, like what Brattleboro has. They will do another forum that focuses on organizations that work with those who are food insecure. One was done already, but there were not many organizations that were able to attend. In the next one, they hope to include a discussion of what can be done to supplement the safety net that exists from SNAP benefits and the like. There is potential to do one on the farmer's market, but that is a complicated one and they are not sure how to approach that. They found out there are several farms that no longer want to participate in the Farmer's market, as they feel there is not a lot of benefit to it. There are some long-term tensions, and they are not sure how to collaborate with them.

The last thing they would like to do towards the end of the process is to collaborate with the Monadnock Sustainability Hub on hosting a climate café that would focus specifically on food systems. The hope is to do an idea jam to present some of their findings, but also get a lot of public input. Ms. Duffy shared that it was the Clean Energy Team that does the climate café. Mr. Russell said that it would not happen until late Spring or Summer. Chair Luse shared that he would love to see more composting in Keene. They compost at his office, and he said the amount of trash they dispose of has dwindled dramatically.

Mr. Russell shared that the Community Kitchen would love to compost their food waste, but it simply is not viable to cart it to Brattleboro. Mr. Roth shared that he was at a Monadnock Interfaith Project Meeting with the Community Kitchen, and they made a statement that if the supply lines were shut off, New England would only have three days' worth of food available. He said it is scary to think about and there is no sustainability when it comes to our food supply.

According to statistics that Kürt Blomquist previously shared, Mr. Russell said the Monadnock region produces only 5% of its food locally. He explained that the region produces more than that locally, but much of it is exported. Those two figures together show that there is not a lot of resilience internally. He thinks that may be the larger umbrella that they will develop their report around.

Mr. Russell suggested everyone think about what they want to develop to inform the Comprehensive Master Plan for the city and suggested the entire committee look at it.

7) **New Business**

Chair Luse said over the years, he has talked with multiple people about participating in this committee and the value of it, but the meeting time was often an issue. He wanted to get a feeling for others' thoughts about meeting at a different time. He noted that Vice Chair Roth often has meeting conflicts at this time. Chair Luse said they could send out a poll. He has already talked to Ms. Fortson and Ms. Brunner about this. He noted that there are some limitations with the timing and availability of rooms.

Councilor Ormerod asked what times those who could not attend had indicated as being more feasible. Chair Luse said they did not indicate specific times, but that 8:00 AM is difficult for those who have kids and are trying to navigate school drop-offs. He shared that when his kids were younger, he was often late as he had to shuttle the kids across town. Work commitments and inflexibility of work schedules have also been highlighted as reasons people have not been able to join.

Mr. Russell said he believed any time is going to have its limitations. He finds this time extremely convenient because all his other meetings are held in the afternoons.

Ms. Fortson introduced herself and explained that she would be filling in for Ms. Brunner during her leave. She offered to create a poll to send out to members allowing them to fill in the times they are and are not available. It was suggested to put it on the agenda for the next meeting to discuss once they have more data.

Mr. Nuru said he can relate as he drops three kids off at different schools and sometimes, he had to put one in childcare to be here for the meeting. He is aware of others who would like to join, but cannot for this same reason.

Mr. Clair Oursler suggested putting a flood plan on the agenda. Vice Chair Roth said the flood plan was updated two years ago, as they came to the hospital to present it.

Ms. Duffy asked if anyone else received an invitation mailer with a \$100 gift card to get off community solar. They are offering \$100 if you switch from community solar and they will give it to you after six months. She worked in utilities for eight years and said she had to read it three times just to figure out what it was and who it came from. She was curious as to who else received it and where it was coming from. She wondered if education around this might be useful.

Mr. Nuru said his wife received it last year. He was not aware, and she went ahead and signed up for it. At the time, Eversource was charging \$0.20. When he received his bill, he detected the change and called them. He requested them to cancel it right away. It is not something he would advise anyone to do, especially now that there is a Community Power Program. He ended up having to go back and forth to finally get a cancellation.

Vice Chair Roth asked if that is something they should put out as educational on the community power websites informing people that they may receive something in the mail, but asked if doing

so would be going beyond their charter. A conversation ensued about firsthand experiences with the frauds. Chair Luse suggested that education and outreach look at creating some education around it.

- 8) **Next Meeting: Wednesday, March 6, 2024- 8:00 AM**
- 9) **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Chair Luse adjourned the meeting at 9:06 AM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Amanda Trask, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Megan Fortson, Planning Technician