

City of Keene
New Hampshire

ENERGY AND CLIMATE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, April 2, 2025

8:00 AM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Ken Swymer, Chair
Paul Roth, Vice Chair
Councilor Bryan Lake
Steve Larmon
Clair Oursler
Lisa Maxfield
Gordon Leversee
Timothy Murphy
Jake Pipp, Alternate (Voting)
Charles Redfern, Alternate (Voting)
Rowland Russell, Alternate (Voting)

Staff Present:

Megan Fortson, Planner
Emily Duseau, Planning Technician

Members Not Present:

Maureen Nebenzahl
Annu Joshi Bargale

1) Call to Order and Roll Call

Chair Swymer called the meeting to order at 8:05 AM and invited Mr. Jake Pipp, Mr. Charles Redfern, and Dr. Rowland Russell to participate as voting members.

2) Approval of Minutes

Chair Swymer welcomed any discussion of the previous meeting's minutes. Mr. Murphy noted a reference on line 78 to the transportation center on "Guilford", which should say "Gilbo." With no other discussion, Councilor Bryan Lake moved to approve the minutes. Mr. Murphy seconded the motion. With all in favor and no opposition, the March 5, 2025, minutes were approved as amended.

3) NH DOE - Request for Comment on Potential Political Subdivision Solar Grant Program

Councilor Bryan Lake stated he did not have all the necessary information and asked for some background on the request for comment.

Planning Technician, Emily Duseau, explained that the program will be designed to support subdivisions in New Hampshire and develop solar projects that reduce energy costs and provide long-term community benefits. She stated that she was assuming that since the committee is an expert on programs related to this, the department would be looking to them for comment, if members had suggestions.

Planner, Megan Fortson, explained that the initiative was prompted by funds received through an Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grant. The goal is to establish a more permanent, ongoing funding source to continue the program beyond the initial grant.

Mr. Murphy, a newer committee member, shared that after reviewing the materials provided by Megan Fortson, he had concerns based on his experience. He pointed out that political subdivisions—like small municipalities, school districts, or water and sewer districts—often vary in resources and staff capacity. His concern is that competitive, point-based funding programs can widen the gap between well-resourced and under-resourced communities, as the former are more likely to succeed. He submitted some feedback.

Ms. Fortson emphasized that sharing was intended to raise awareness within the committee, suggesting they could consider submitting formal comments or a letter as a group or submit individual feedback. The Chair could also draft a letter and submit it on behalf of the Committee.

Mr. Redfern acknowledged that Vice Chair Roth had joined the meeting and offered to serve as an alternate. Ms. Fortson said he could remain a voting member since committee member Annu Joshi Bargale was absent.

Dr. Gordon Leversee noted that the April 18th deadline for submitting written comments is approaching quickly, limiting what the Committee can accomplish beyond the current meeting. Given the length and complexity of the feedback questions, he suggested drafting a general letter of support for the program that also includes Mr. Murphy's concern about equitable access for less-resourced communities. Mr. Murphy acknowledged that responding as a Committee on a short timeline can be challenging and said he's open to submitting individual comments instead.

Dr. Larmon raised a question about whether this process is routine for the state or something new, noting that if it is a new initiative, it could be a valuable opportunity, especially given local interest in solar energy. He emphasized the importance of Mr. Murphy's point about supporting less-advantaged communities. He questioned how much the committee—and the community—would genuinely benefit from the program and whether that makes their input more or less significant. He invited other Committee members to share their thoughts based on their experience, asking how much attention the Committee should give to this issue. Chair Swymer stated he was unsure how often the committee has written such letters.

Though this opportunity is new, Ms. Fortson explained that it is common for the Committee to submit letters in response to state requests for feedback. While the Committee would not directly benefit from writing a letter, it could help influence state-level programs that may eventually impact municipalities. She acknowledged the short two-week timeline and clarified that submitting

a letter is optional—it can be done by the Chair with staff support if the Committee chooses, or members can submit individual comments instead.

Chair Swymer expressed that supporting the program aligns with the Committee's values and priorities. He felt that offering support at the state level would be worthwhile.

Ms. Fortson asked when the solar workgroup would be meeting and suggested that, since the group focuses on relevant topics, they could be delegated to draft key points for a Committee letter. Dr. Leversee shared that they meet next week and agreed that the workgroup could try to do that.

Councilor Lake confirmed that writing letters is common for the Committee, noting that they've previously sent letters to the City Council, state, and federal government. He clarified that the Committee doesn't need to finalize the exact content before sending it. Given the standard nature of the process, Councilor Lake offered to go ahead and make the motion to write the letter. He moved that the Committee write a letter in support of the solar grant program. Mr. Paul Roth seconded the motion. With all in favor and no opposed, the motion passed.

Ms. Fortson stated that she and Ms. Duseau would contact the workgroup members independently. She also offered that either she or Ms. Duseau would attend the Teams meeting so that a staff member could be present for support.

4) NH DOE - Request for Comment on Renewable Portfolio Standard Program

Ms. Duseau explained that the Department of Energy seeks input on this program through stakeholder sessions held via Microsoft Teams. The first session is scheduled for Wednesday, April 23rd at 1:00 PM. She shared this information to encourage anyone interested in the program or providing feedback to attend the meeting.

5) Community Power Program Updates

Ms. Duseau reported that on March 20th, the City Council approved the Finance, Organization, and Personnel (FOP) Committee's recommendation to set the 50% renewable energy option as the default for the Community Power Plan. There are two opt-down options: 25% and 35% renewable—and one opt-up option for 100% renewable energy. She also noted that while an adder fee was not included in the current plan, it may be considered an option in the future. City Council voted to give the City Manager the authority to make this determination in the future.

Councilor Lake provided background on the City Council's decision regarding the Community Power Plan. Initially, the Council unanimously supported the 50% renewable default option, but concerns about cost led to the plan being sent back to the Committee. The final version maintained the four plan options, raised the default from 35% to 50% renewable, and excluded an adder fee as part of this particular set of updates, but gave the City Manager the authority to look into this again in the future. He emphasized that cost concerns were central to the Council's debate. He highlighted the need for clear public communication about available options, especially for those

needing lower-cost plans. Lake also noted the importance of public outreach—via Earth Day events, mailers, or radio—to ensure the program’s success.

Mr. Peter Hansel asked if Councilor Lake knew the time frame for when the contract is expected to be finalized. Councilor Lake responded that the contract timeline remains flexible, and the City Manager will provide updates in the future.

Ms. Fortson clarified that they do not have any more specific information. She stated that Councilor Lake is correct. City Council and Staff wanted to take care of this process so that, should there be a good opportunity to secure a reasonable rate, the City Manager can strike while the iron is hot.

Chair Swymer asked whether there had been any discussion or concern about how offering lower renewable energy options might impact the City’s ability to meet its 2030 goal of achieving 100% renewable energy. He acknowledged the importance of having affordable options, but questioned whether this could slow progress toward that goal.

Councilor Lake responded that concerns about meeting the 2030 100% renewable energy goal were indeed discussed. He emphasized that without action—like setting the default at 50%—the City will not reach that target. Some Councilors questioned whether the 2030 goal is realistic, with at least one suggesting it might need to shift to 2035. Lake acknowledged that while the goal is ambitious, it is not unreasonable to reassess progress midway. However, he noted that this kind of reconsideration could open the door to broader changes and expressed that some Councilors are hesitant about the current pace toward 100% renewable energy.

Dr. Russell suggested that, based on examples from other cities, one way to support the goal of 100% renewable energy is to create a fund—through public contributions or grants—that could subsidize the cost for those who cannot afford it. He did not offer a specific plan, but wanted to put the idea on the record and encourage the Committee to consider developing it further.

Vice Chair Roth asked about Eversource’s schedule, which he felt would weigh heavily on the rate. Councilor Lake and Mr. Hansel clarified that it is six months apart. Vice Chair Roth then asked what type of term they were discussing with this latest election, to which Mr. Hansel responded that it was 30 months.

Vice Chair Roth discussed the timing of the City’s renewable energy goals concerning the 30-month contract cycle for the Community Power Program. He pointed out that nearly two complete contract cycles are left before 2030, which is essential when considering progress toward the City’s 100% renewable energy goal. He noted that this timing is relevant to the Committee’s planning and brought it up from an analytical and engineering perspective.

Councilor Lake explained that after finalizing the current Community Power Plan, the City will have one more contract cycle before the timeline for reaching its 2030 goal of 100% renewable

energy will come to an end. He noted that even if the goal were extended to 2035, incremental progress would still require higher steps now—ideally 65% renewable power set as the default during this cycle rather than the selected 50%. While acknowledging the challenge of a significant jump to 100% in the next cycle, he expressed confidence that the City could achieve the goal with continued effort and planning.

Mr. Hansel pointed out that the future of energy pricing is uncertain, and renewable energy may become more affordable over the next five years. He emphasized that while it is essential to consider energy sources, the actual supplier may differ, making market conditions a key factor. Ultimately, he noted, the City must remain flexible and responsive to changes in the energy market.

6) Monadnock Earth Festival - Planning and Preparation

Chair Swymer shared that the Earth Festival is scheduled for April 26th and confirmed that the Committee will have a booth there. Councilor Lake confirmed and shared that a small group met earlier to plan logistics and materials. They discussed creating a QR code sheet linking to key resources like the Community Power program and Keene's Energy Plan to minimize printed materials. Some handouts will still be available for those who prefer paper. Lake also mentioned reviewing past materials from a previous event and confirmed that essentials like a tent, table, and tablecloth are being arranged. Planning is actively underway.

Ms. Fortson encouraged connecting with she and Emily for Earth Festival planning details. She confirmed that past materials, including a formatted brochure, have been shared and suggested creating postcards with QR codes linking to relevant websites. The City can print these using existing branding templates. Ms. Fortson noted there's extra promotional funding available for the Master Plan project, so they'll also have a separate tent for it. She mentioned efforts to place both tables next to each other and said logistics are still being finalized. She sees the event as an excellent opportunity for strong City visibility.

Vice Chair Roth offered that he has tents if they need them. Ms. Fortson said she would work with him on organizing that. Vice Chair Roth brought up the need for a banner or signage to identify the Committee at the Earth Festival, asking where it might be placed—on the table or the tent—and whether resources were available. Ms. Fortson responded that they could design a banner using Canva with the City's branding kit, but printing it could cost money. She noted they could print something in-house on paper using a plotter, or if a more durable option is preferred, the Committee would need to vote to allocate funds. She also confirmed that the City does not have a standard vinyl banner with the logo, but they want to purchase one.

Ms. Duseau noted that, currently, only materials for the Master Plan table are available, but if the Committee wants to produce additional items, they could use their budget. Councilor Lake asked how much of the budget remains, and Ms. Fortson estimated around \$250. She added that there likely won't be any other expenses for the remainder of the fiscal year, which is ending soon.

Dr. Russell suggested that if there will be three City-related tables at the Earth Festival—such as Energy and Climate, the Bike Path Committee, and the Master Plan—they should be grouped to create a unified, City-focused presence. He also mentioned that the Bike Path Committee sometimes collaborates with Pathways for Keene, which could be included in the cluster to strengthen the City’s visibility and shared mission.

Mr. Redfern asked if a table had been reserved. Ms. Fortson and Councilor Lake discussed the logistics for reserving space at the Earth Festival. Ms. Fortson mentioned that the Community Development Department signed up the day before and requested a spot near the ECC, hoping to cluster City tables together. Councilor Lake confirmed he had checked on the reservation, but had not submitted it.

Ms. Fortson added that their department will order a banner. To create a cohesive City presence, she suggested placing the Energy and Climate Committee on one side and the Bike Path Committee on the other. To help differentiate the groups, she proposed using posters on easels and printing large-format materials with the City’s plotter. She also noted that if the Committee wants to pursue a banner, they would need to act quickly due to time constraints.

Mr. Pipp emphasized the need for a clear, immediate solution for Earth Day signage to help identify the Energy and Climate Committee specifically, rather than just the City of Keene. He suggested a more specific banner would help distinguish the committee from others. Given the available budget funds and the fact that the Committee tables at multiple events throughout the year, he recommended investing in a permanent banner to improve visibility and avoid repeating the same issue at future events.

Mr. Redfern suggested that the Bicycle Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee (BPPAC), which usually shares a table with Pathways for Keene at Earth Day, should instead have its table alongside other City committees to strengthen the City’s presence. Given the tight timeline, BPPAC’s next meeting is only a week away—he recommended that City Staff, with the Chair’s approval, reach out to BPPAC to encourage them to plan their table and banner. Dr. Russell mentioned that BPPAC has been considering purchasing a banner and has proposed coordinating with other committees to get a better deal if multiple banners are ordered.

Councilor Lake supported purchasing event materials, noting that the Committee’s budget will be reset in the upcoming fiscal year. With that in mind, he motioned for the Committee to expend up to the remainder of the budget on event planning materials. Dr. Larmon seconded his motion. With all in favor and no opposed, the motion passed.

Mrs. Lisa Maxfield reminded the group that this was their last meeting before Earth Day and emphasized the need for volunteers to staff the booth. She encouraged everyone to take a one-hour shift, noting it’s an excellent opportunity to connect with fellow Committee members and share information about their work with the community.

Chair Swymer asked if there was an electronic signup sheet for people to sign up. The group agreed to create one with times included for setup and breakdown. Councilor Lake offered to send it out sometime before the end of the day.

Ms. Fortson asked Chair Swymer to clarify whether the committee wanted the new banner ready in time for Earth Fest or if it was for general future use. Chair Swymer confirmed that having it prepared for Earth Fest would be ideal. Ms. Fortson explained they usually design banners in Canva and use vendors like Gem Graphics or Curry Copy, depending on cost. Given the tight timeline, she asked if staff could be delegated to handle the design, and Chair Swymer agreed, saying it made the most sense. Ms. Fortson confirmed the banner would feature specific City branding and be labeled for the Energy and Climate Committee, to be stored with the committee's materials.

Dr. Russell shared that the Bicycle Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee (BPPAC) is considering designing its own graphics or logo to represent the group, with an update expected at their next meeting. He suggested that if anyone in the Energy and Climate Committee had a quick idea for a similar graphic, they could share it with the City for potential use in branding. Mrs. Maxfield asked if City Committees could create their logos, and Dr. Russell clarified that it would just be a graphic to represent the Committee's function, not an official City logo. Ms. Fortson added that it would need to be run through communications and marketing for the final stamp of approval.

Mr. Redfern emphasized the importance of coordinating banner efforts between the Energy and Climate Committee and the Bicycle Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee (BPPAC), noting that BPPAC had planned to have a banner last year, but it never materialized. He encouraged aligning branding while maintaining clear distinctions between the committees. Dr. Russell agreed and said he would contact the BPPAC Chair, Sam Jackson, to share design ideas with Mr. Will Schoefmann, the staff liaison. Ms. Fortson confirmed she would coordinate with Mr. Schoefmann in the effort.

7) Annual Retreat

The committee reviewed potential retreat dates, initially considering three options in April and May. Members discussed whether previous retreats were two or three hours long, recalling they had been longer and often ran out of time. They agreed that a four-hour retreat would be more effective.

The retreat's key goals include reviewing the current work groups' status and identifying the committee's top three priorities. Dr. Russell suggested that if the retreat is extended to four hours, a new scheduling poll should be conducted, as his availability would change—and others likely feel the same.

Given the upcoming Earth Fest event, the group agreed to focus on scheduling the retreat for May to allow more planning time. There was also mention of potentially inviting a guest speaker, as done in past retreats, with the committee coordinating ideas and logistics.

Mr. Murphy suggested adding a discussion about the city's Hazard Mitigation Plan update to the agenda for the next meeting. Ms. Fortson agreed, noting it's a timely and relevant topic with significant overlap with the Committee's work. She said it's also easier to coordinate since City Staff—specifically Mike Hagan (Plans Examiner & Floodplain Manager) and Kurt Blomquist (Emergency Management Director)—could present. The Committee supported the idea. They agreed to revisit retreat scheduling and speaker planning at the next meeting and address board-related items.

8) Potential Meeting Days and Times

Chair Swymer and Ms. Duseau discussed the recent surveys sent to Committee members regarding retreat dates and meeting times. Ms. Duseau clarified that there were seven responses for the retreat survey and six for the meeting time survey. Chair Swymer mentioned that the current meeting time is difficult for him due to other commitments, but acknowledged it's still manageable. He opened the discussion to hear thoughts from other members.

Mrs. Maxfield asked about the survey results, and Ms. Duseau explained that they had reviewed the responses and identified a few of the most popular options. She noted that since most committee members were present, they hoped to choose a final option during the meeting.

Based on the survey results, Chair Swymer listed the potential new meeting time options: Wednesdays or Thursdays, from 8:00–9:00 AM or 4:30–5:30 PM. He said afternoons are generally easier for him, and Mrs. Maxfield agreed, expressing her preference for afternoon meetings. They opened the discussion for other members to weigh in.

Dr. Russell shared that his preference would be the opposite, as Antioch is on West Coast time, resulting in meetings until 5:30 PM or 6:00 PM. He also has BPPAC on the second Wednesday of the month from 8:00 AM–9:00 AM. Mr. Redfern added that he is also on the BPPAC committee.

Chair Swymer called for a raise-of-hands vote to determine whether the committee preferred morning or afternoon meeting times. Five members voted for morning and four for afternoon, showing a slight preference for morning meetings. Chair Swymer acknowledged the close split and noted that either option could work for him.

Mr. Murphy noted that while some members, like himself, prefer morning meetings, it might be a challenge for others. He emphasized the importance of accommodating Chair Swymer's schedule, expressing concern that choosing mornings shouldn't come at the cost of excluding the chair. Chair Swymer responded that morning meetings are often difficult for him due to his work schedule.

Ms. Duseau added that the discussion about meeting times also considers potential future committee members. Like the current 8:00 AM slot, early morning meetings may exclude individuals with work schedule conflicts. The goal is to make meetings more accessible and inclusive for a broader range of participants moving forward.

Dr. Russell shared that he has a standing Thursday afternoon meeting, which would prevent him from attending committee meetings at that time. He noted he is available on Wednesday afternoons, making that the better option for his schedule.

Mr. Pipp asked about preferences for specific weeks of the month for Wednesday meetings. Dr. Russell noted he's unavailable on the first and second Wednesdays, but is generally free on the third and fourth. Mrs. Maxfield agreed that afternoons work better for her due to work obligations, but staying fully present can still be challenging. They decided choosing a time with fewer conflicts would be ideal and leaned toward holding meetings on the fourth Wednesday afternoon, rather than the last, to avoid occasional fifth-week scheduling issues.

Chair Swymer expressed support for afternoon meetings, noting they may be more accessible for current and future members, especially those with typical work hours or school drop-off responsibilities. He agreed with the earlier point about avoiding barriers to participation and concluded that Wednesday afternoons are likely the best option for the group.

The group discussed finalizing the new meeting schedule. They agreed to hold meetings on the fourth Wednesday of each month from 4:30 to 5:30 PM and will investigate securing space at City Hall. A draft meeting schedule will be presented at the next meeting for adoption. While there was a brief discussion about considering other weekdays, the group decided to stick with Wednesday based on survey responses.

9) Annual Reports for Boards and Commissions

Chair Swymer, Ms. Duseau, and Ms. Fortson discussed the upcoming annual committee report due July 1st. While the report is technically optional, the Committee intends to provide City Council with an update. Ms. Fortson explained that the format is flexible; it can be a brief written document or a formal presentation to a Council committee. The decision on the format will be up to the Committee. They agreed it would be best to revisit this after Earth Fest and during the upcoming retreat, where it could be included as a discussion item.

Dr. Larmon asked how the Committee's annual report would be used and whether it served a purpose beyond providing information. Ms. Fortson explained that the report is intended strictly for informational purposes, primarily to update the City Council on the Committee's activities and plans. She noted that, due to the large number of City Committees, councilors often request updates like this to stay informed. The report is not intended for public distribution or resident engagement, but will be especially timely following the upcoming retreat.

Dr. Russell suggested that in the future, once the new Master Plan is approved, each work group should align its work and report with the plan, highlighting how their efforts support its goals. This would serve to track progress on the plan over time. Ms. Fortson agreed and proposed discussing the Master Plan at the retreat, mainly focusing on the environmental pillar relevant to the Energy and Climate Committee. Chair Swymer supported the idea, agreeing it should be an early focus of the retreat.

Mr. Hansel emphasized the importance of including metrics in the Committee's report to track the City's progress toward its 100% renewable energy goal. He noted that having clear, consistent metrics reported annually to the City Council is essential for understanding where the City stands and how it's advancing toward its objectives. He strongly advocated making this a regular part of the Committee's reporting process.

10) Work Group Report Outs

A) Community Solar

Dr. Leversee reported that the Solar Workgroup met on March 12th and plans to meet again next week to review the proposed funding and provide feedback on the Solar Subdivision Program's request for comments from the state. He shared that past discussions have been primarily informational and noted that the workgroup's primary focus—identifying solar sites—has plateaued. As a result, they are looking for a new direction. He suggested that the upcoming retreat could be a valuable opportunity to explore future goals for the solar workgroup. While the idea of a speaker was considered, he emphasized the importance of reserving time in the retreat agenda for Committee discussion and input on the next steps.

B) Grants, Fundraising, and Partnerships

Mr. Redfern brought up the topic of grants and funding, noting he had been away and was unsure of the status of the grant workgroup or its members, especially with the new calendar year. The group acknowledged that there have been many changes and agreed that the upcoming retreat would be a good time to reevaluate the workgroups, clarify membership, and potentially set new goals. Ms. Maxfield added that the retreat might also be an opportunity to shift the Committee's overall focus and restructure the workgroups as needed.

C) Education and Outreach

Vice Chair Roth shared that Earth Day has been their primary focus.

D) Legislative Tracking

Councilor Lake shared that his focus was the Community Power Program.

E) Food Security

Dr. Russell provided an update on the situation with the community garden, sharing that the City sold the land to Cedarcrest so that they can construct a solar array, meaning gardening on the Monadnock View Cemetery site will not continue until 2026. Gardeners were not initially informed, but later mobilized and spoke at the Planning Board meeting, which, while too late to change the decision, raised awareness within the City. As a result, a small portion of the land—about a tenth the size of the original garden space—will be preserved for limited gardening and relocating some perennials and pollinator plants.

Efforts are underway to find alternative gardening sites for the 2025 season, and the gardening community has grown stronger through this challenge. Dr. Russell noted that while the situation is difficult, it presents opportunities to build new partnerships and focus more on long-term solutions for food security, including supporting home gardening. The discussion closed with the recognition that this experience underscores the importance of building strong community relationships that extend beyond committee work.

Dr. Russell emphasized the importance of the City sharing relevant information with the Energy and Climate Committee, noting that they could have planned better if the group had known about the sale of the community garden land. He also reminded the group that, for the upcoming retreat, there has been discussion about broadening the food security workgroup's focus beyond food security to include broader climate impacts—such as flooding—to better align with the Committee's mission. Vice Chair Roth noted that the upcoming hazard mitigation discussion would align well with this expanded focus.

11) New Business

Councilor Lake shared new business about Eversource's Free Tree Program, encouraging members to look it up online. However, Mr. Hansel noted the program had already closed, due to high demand. He added that the City of Keene plans to plant 40 trees this spring with help from the Rotary Club.

Ms. Duseau announced a Red Pine Scale Walk and Talk event at Wheelock Park on April 6th at 1:00 PM and encouraged anyone interested to attend. She will forward the information in case some members missed it.

12) Adjournment

With no further business, Chair Swymer adjourned the meeting at 9:11 AM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Amanda Trask, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Megan Fortson, Planner