

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, July 16, 2025

4:30 PM

**Council Chambers,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Hope Benik, Vice Chair
Anthony Ferrantello
Louise Zerba

Staff Present:

Evan Clements, Planner

Members Not Present:

Councilor Catherine Workman
David Bergeron, Alternate
Peter Poanessa, Alternate
Russ Fleming, Alternate

1) Call to Order and Roll Call

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos called the meeting to order at 4:33 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) Minutes: May 21, 2025

Mr. Ferrantello made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of May 21, 2025. Ms. Zerba seconded the motion.

Mr. Clements stated that he has a correction: on the list of members present, Russ Fleming should be listed as an alternate member.

Mr. Ferrantello made a motion to amend, to approve the May 21 meeting minutes with the correction noted. Ms. Zerba seconded the motion to amend, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Public Hearing

- A) **COA-2024-04, Modification #1 – 33 Center St. – Rooftop Solar Installation – Applicant Simon Gray of Green Energy Options, on behalf of owner William Brown, proposes to install a 16-panel rooftop solar energy system on the existing ~1,156-sf building located at 33 Center St. (TMP #568-015-000). The parcel is 0.10-ac in size and is ranked as a Contributing Resource in the Downtown Transition District.**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked to hear from staff. Mr. Clements stated that the Applicant requested exemptions from supplying mortar and brick and other material samples. He continued that after reviewing the request, staff determined that the requested exemption would have no bearing on the merits of the application, and they recommend the application be accepted as complete.

Ms. Zerba made a motion to accept the application as complete. Mr. Ferrantello seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos opened the public hearing and asked to hear from the Applicant.

Simon Gray stated that he is the Applicant on behalf of the property owner, William Brown. He continued that there are 16 photovoltaic panels, and their layout is in the application. There are two roof surfaces, both facing south. Those are to be tied into the existing electrical service inside the building. The builder already put a pass-through on the roof, so they will not need to use an exterior conduit. They are all black-on-black panels. The idea is to minimize the visible impact on any passersby.

Mr. Gray continued that they paid attention to the Land Development Code (LDC), particularly Section 22.5.5. There are sections in the narrative that detail how they are taking steps to conform to those parameters, minimizing visibility, trying to blend in with the roof, and putting as much of the material as possible inside the building. Those are the three main ways they are minimizing visual impact.

Mr. Ferrantello stated that he read on page 17 of 28 that the type of solar panel is a Q cell panel, Korean or Japanese. He asked if it is a mono-crystalline type, which is the best. Mr. Gray replied that is right. Mr. Ferrantello stated that he heard through research that there is an N-type cell, and depending on the silicone used, you can get good, 24% production capacity, or something like that. That gives you normally 450 to 550 watts per panel. If indeed what (the applicant) is getting is about 438 or 440 [unfinished sentence]. Mr. Gray replied that the maximum output is 435 watts. Mr. Ferrantello replied that if you divide 550 into 7,000 watts, it is 13 panels. Although they are mostly available for commercial application these days, not residential, if you divide 7,000 by 700, that is 10 panels. South facing is optimal for solar gain, but per the HDC guidelines, it is not optimal for historic buildings facing the right-of-way. They have 10 of them on the non-contributing factor of the building, which is the addition, and six on the dormer on top of the original building. He wonders if it is possible to do some configuration where those six on the original building can go on the north side with those new far-fangled N-type panels.

Mr. Gray replied that that is an interesting thought. He continued that as far as currently available panels, there are commercial panels which are generally not used in this setting that are up to 500 watts, which they have access to. He is not aware of any currently available panel that exceeds that by much, if at all. The purpose of the project is to generate electricity. Even the most advanced panel with the highest density wattage would do very little if it were facing north. He thinks that would directly interfere with the feasibility of the project.

Mr. Ferrantello asked, how about where the ground is? He continued that he knows the site is limited, but he wonders if something could be done on a pole or some ground-mounted solution. Mr. Gray replied that given the property setback requirements and the minimal size of the lot, he does not see a space where that would be feasible. He thinks it would probably have a much greater visual impact than the flush-mounted panels put on the roof.

Mr. Ferrantello replied that on the earth, there would be no impact to the building, and that is the concern. He continued that there are two different angles, the lower original shed, and the dormer. He knows they are doing low reflective surfaces, but he wonders, because about four or five inches away from the roof's surface, you will still see it. It is not like it is invisible. It is a shiny (object), and regardless of how much non-reflective coating there is, you will see some reflectivity. The question is whether the top windows of the courthouse or others will get blinded. That is one of his concerns.

Mr. Gray replied that as Mr. Ferrantello said, the panels will have a coating to minimize their reflectivity, but absolutely, they are not invisible, and light reflects off them. He continued that to Mr. Ferrantello's point, the panels are facing the back parking lot of the courthouse. He imagines the visual impact to the neighbors would be quite minimal.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the HDC had more questions for the applicant. Hearing none, she asked if staff had comments.

Mr. Clements stated that this property came before the HDC at the end of last year for an entryway addition, so this will sound familiar. He continued that the residence of 33 Center St. was constructed around 1840 on land that covered an area west of Central Square, south of West St. to Court St. and north of the Square to Vernon and Mechanic St. An 8-acre parcel was subdivided and purchased by Abijah Wilder, who sold lots to Charles Kingsbury and Timothy Colony. The property appears on the map of Keene in 1853 under the ownership of A. Wilder, with a brick home construction. The Lea family owned the house from 1886 to 1954. The Murphy family then purchased the home and continued to own the property until it was sold in 1989. The property was then used as a rental for Keene State College students.

Mr. Clements continued that as discussed, this application proposes installing a 16-panel rooftop solar energy system on the south-facing asphalt shingle roof surfaces. The project will include panels on the second story main roof and the third story dormer. This qualifies as a Major Project. Most of the standards appear to be met with this project, including the system being installed to be removed if necessary, and colors and equipment being similar to the surface that it is being installed on. All the associated mechanicals and accessory components will be run to the interior of the building, as opposed to being run through the exterior, except for the emergency shut-off, which is proposed to be installed next to the existing electrical meter for the home, which is a permitted area. From a safety perspective, it is the preferred location for that shut-off.

Mr. Clements continued that Mr. Ferrantello's discussion related to the overall visual impact of the system is the only thing that staff feels the HDC should make a determination on. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked about the regularity. Mr. Clements replied yes, (Section 22.5.5

Renewable Energy Systems) says, “*Solar array grids should be regular in shape and jointed. Multi-roof solutions should be avoided.*” He continued that the HDC should deliberate on the feasibility of the project and how it is designed the way it is.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that next is the invitation of public comment. She continued that seeing no members of the public present, she will close the public hearing.

Ms. Zerba asked if they received any written comments from neighbors regarding the solar arrays. Mr. Gray replied that they did not. Mr. Clements replied that staff did not, either.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked the HDC to deliberate.

Mr. Ferrantello stated that to continue on the earlier questions and comments, there are two planes and two angles, all facing the right-of-way. He continued that the question before the HDC is whether that is appropriate, because it is the least desirable location for solar panels. Usually, you have to hide them somewhere. That is why he made those comments about it being visible. You can see them from a pedestrian perspective all the way from Winter St. The question before the HDC is, aesthetically and based upon the parameters before them, whether visually impactful impact is acceptable or not.

Mr. Clements replied that the focus is more about whether the proposal is the best that it can be. He continued that the property is located on a corner, for example, with a lot of right-of-way to contend with. Whether the portion of the roof that is facing Winter St. is a suitable alternative from the primary façade being the Center St. orientation, and (questions) like that, (are the HDC’s focus). It is not about saying, “*Oh, we can see it from the roof, so you can’t have it.*” It is whether the orientation of the panels is such that the impact is reduced as much as practically possible. That is the kind of test they are looking for.

Mr. Ferrantello stated that another question is how the 7 kilowatts was established. He asked if that is the necessary parameter to heat whatever needs to be heated in the building.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos re-opened the public hearing to allow the Applicant to answer the question.

Mr. Gray stated that the system size is calculated based on the known inputs. It is an estimate based on everything that is being installed in the house. It is based off the appliances that are going to be installed in there. Mr. Ferrantello replied that it sounds like the minimum to do what they need to do. Mr. Gray replied yes, to make it a feasible project, there is a minimum size.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she would point out that even if the Applicant could do without one or two panels, all of the issues of visibility remain, so being down a few panels (would not change it). Mr. Ferrantello replied that from his perspective, they would have to go down to at least six, but he does not think that would be doable. He continued that if this is the best that can be done, that is an interesting question, because that is the litmus test.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she would point out that Mr. Ferrantello knows a great deal about solar systems, and she herself knows a little bit about solar systems, but they (Green Energy Options) are the experts. She continued that she does not think the intention of this hearing is for the HDC to review their calculations and determine if they have actually done a good job of it. Mr. Ferrantello replied that he agrees.

Mr. Clements replied that at the same time, he does not think Mr. Ferrantello's questions are out of turn, because they are talking about the entire system. He continued that (examples are) whether the system is designed to be what is truly needed, or if it is over designed, or if the panels are haphazardly proposed to be installed. Those were good questions and good answers from the Applicant. It builds a solid argument for why it is designed the way it is.

Mr. Ferrantello asked if the panels are about 4' by 5'. Mr. Gray replied about 41" by 71". Mr. Ferrantello replied that they are nicely lined up between the skylights, and then there are six on top of the dormer. He continued that he goes back to the original question of (whether it is) the best that can be done in a corner lot, and the answer is yes, because they have the optimal solar gain. It might not be optimal, but given the parameters they are given, it is not an optimal situation. He is gravitating toward understanding the Applicant's perspective, as compared to the ideal that he himself would like to have. He sees the reasonableness of it.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked Mr. Ferrantello to clarify what he meant by "it is not optimal." She asked if he means the Applicant has not optimized the situation, or it is not optimal to what the HDC would prefer it to be. Mr. Ferrantello replied that it is not optimal to their (the HDC's) standards, but given the condition that was presented, "optimal" is not what they can reach.

Ms. Zerba stated that based on the discussion and the way the lot is configured, and (that there are) only (certain) places where these solar arrays can be placed in order to do the job they were intended to do, she will move to approve the application.

Ms. Zerba made a motion to approve COA-2024-04, Modification #1, to allow the installation of a 16-panel rooftop solar energy system on the property located at 33 Center St., as presented in the plan set titled "New PV System: 6.960 kW, Brown Residence" prepared by Green Energy Options, received May 14, 2025, at a scale of 3/23" = 1' and in the application and supporting materials received May 14, 2025 with no conditions. Mr. Ferrantello seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Mr. Gray stated that he had a question for Mr. Clements. He continued that they would like to move forward. He separately submitted the building permit. Mr. Clements can let him know if there is anything else staff needs, or if they can pick up the permit. Mr. Clements replied that he will check with the building team tomorrow to see if there is anything else they need.

4) Discussion

A) Outreach and Student Engagement Project

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Mr. Ferrantello had news. Mr. Ferrantello replied that he gave a letter to the Chair of the Architecture Department (at Keene State College), Dr. Fernando

Del Ama Gonzalo, who was optimistic and excited about it. He continued that he and Dr. Del Ama Gonzalo are trading ideas, but it has been a while since his communication. He wonders if they should contact Dr. Del Ama Gonzalo again. The outstanding question is what code information or background information they (the HDC/City) can give him, so he can shuffle that information to create media. He thinks Mr. Clements needs to give Dr. Del Ama Gonzalo the information.

Mr. Clements stated that he does not have anything new on this (agenda item). He continued that it has sort of fallen by the wayside for him as well. He is happy to reach out to Dr. Del Ama Gonzalo and restart the conversation. Maybe an in-person meeting would be productive, to see how feasible this idea is. Probably it would not be for this coming semester, but it is worth keeping up the momentum. Mr. Ferrantello replied that he agrees that an in-person meeting is the way to go. Mr. Clements asked if Mr. Ferrantello wants to be involved. Mr. Ferrantello replied yes. Mr. Clements asked if anyone else has the capacity to be involved in a day meeting. Ms. Benik replied that she would like to attend and is happy to help.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if they need to limit the number of HDC members who participate, to avoid creating a quorum. Mr. Clements replied yes, at least for the first meeting. He continued that it could start as an informal working group, and depending on how it evolves, maybe someone could come and present to the HDC. Ms. Zerba stated that she does not need to be present, so that avoids quorum. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she was thinking it would be great if Mr. Clements and Mr. Ferrantello could set it up and the rest of the HDC could be there if their schedules allowed, but if that would create issues with quorum, (they could do it differently).

B) Annual Report Letter to City Council

Mr. Clements thanked Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos for sending him the letter. He continued that he will look at it tomorrow, and if anything needs to be changed, he will let her know. Otherwise, he will put it on City letterhead and send it back to Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos for her signature. Once he sends her the signed version, he will get it to the City Clerk's Office.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if anyone had questions. (No).

5) Staff Updates

Mr. Clements stated that the draft document of the Master Plan is online. He continued that after they make a few tweaks to it, it will go to the Steering Committee for a recommendation for adoption, probably in August. The City Council is on vacation for the last two weeks of July and the first two weeks of August, so it probably will not go to City Council until September or October. They are aiming for final adoption in early fall and then will go right into implementation. They will try not to lose the momentum of the public engagement aspect of this project. If HDC members know people who are interested in volunteering on something that might not be as formal as a board or commission, that would be great.

6) New Business

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there was any new business. (No).

7) Upcoming Dates of Interest

A) Next HDC Meeting: August 20, 2025 – 4:30 PM

B) HDC Site Visit: August 20, 2025 – 3:30 PM (to be confirmed)

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the next meeting is August 20. She asked if they have had any applications. Mr. Clements replied no, and he does not know the application deadline off the top of his head – either this Friday or next Friday. He continued that he will keep the HDC updated on whether they will be meeting in August. They need to wait until the revision deadline.

8) Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 5:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Evan J. Clements, AICP
Planner/Deputy Zoning Administrator