

April 23, 2019, 10:00 AM
Corinna Township Hall
9801 Ireland Avenue NW, Annandale, MN

Present: Chairman Larry Smith, Supervisor John Dearing. Absent: Supervisor Chuck Carlson

Other Attendees: Planning Commissioner Dick Naaktgeboren, Planning Commissioner Al Guck, Zoning Administrator Ben Oleson, Evan Carlson, IPS Solar, Robert Maki, SunShare Community Solar

Smith called the special meeting to order at 10:00 AM.

Oleson summarized the purpose of the meeting to allow an opportunity for the Township to have questions answered regarding "solar farm" or "solar garden" from representatives of the solar industry. The meeting attendees from the Township represented an ad hoc committee formed to gather information. Representatives from solar development companies that had recently applied for solar garden installations or had expressed interest in doing so were invited to attend the meeting or submit any written comments. A list of questions had been sent out to those solar representatives ahead of the meeting, although the meeting does not have to be limited to those questions. Oleson noted that the meeting followed the passage of an interim ordinance putting up to a one-year hold on solar farm applications and that the Township would be looking for information to further understand the potential impacts of solar farms, positive and negative, before deciding whether to proceed with ordinance amendments.

The committee and Town Board members discussed the list of questions sent out to the solar developer representatives with Mr. Carlson and Mr. Maki as well as other issues relating to solar farms. At the conclusion of those discussions Mr. Carlson and Mr. Maki left the meeting.

Further discussion amongst the Town Board and Planning Commission members followed regarding options for addressing the solar farm issues. Options discussed included, but were not limited to, a total prohibition on new solar farms, adding additional restrictions to where solar farms could be located within the township, whether to remove existing language in the ordinance that requires interim uses to cease operation within two years of an ordinance amendment that prohibits that interim use.

The consensus of those in attendance was that the appropriate next step would be to schedule a public hearing to allow public input on amendments to the Township's Land Use Ordinance that would prohibit new solar farms within the entire Township. This would allow the Township to gain more insight into the feelings of the Township's residents and landowners on the issue. Oleson indicated he could plan to draft an ordinance amendment consistent with prohibiting solar farms and schedule a public hearing for the regular May 14, 2019 meeting of the Planning Commission.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:22 AM.

Respectfully submitted,



Ben Oleson
Township Zoning Administrator



Ben Oleson <oleson@hometownplanning.com>

Corinna Township Solar meeting

1 message

Ben Oleson <oleson@hometownplanning.com>

Fri, Apr 19, 2019 at 9:30 AM

Bcc: nate@nokomis.partners, Nicole Vaughn <nicole@nokomis.partners>, Meisha McDaniel <meisha@u-renew.com>, Evan Carlson <evanc@ips-solar.com>, Andy Stahlman <andys@ips-solar.com>, rmaki@mysunshare.com, Drew Leonard <dleonard@mysunshare.com>

I am writing back to confirm the time of the meeting that I had previously emailed about with you. **We are looking at next Tuesday at 10:00am at Corinna Town Hall** (9801 Ireland Ave NW, Annandale, MN 55302).

We had previously had several solar developers express interest in this kind of meeting, so at this point it looks like at least 3 solar companies will be represented. We are thinking that the meeting would be an hour or less and pretty informal. It would be with a subset of the Town Board and Planning Commission and while we may have to post it as a public meeting on the bulletin board at Town Hall since we might have 2 of the 3 Town Board members there, it won't be a public hearing.

To help you prepare a bit, here are a list of questions/concerns that the Township has at this point that we just wanted to get your some perspective on from the solar developers. All of the solar developer representatives are receiving this list of questions/concerns in advance of the meeting:

1. Corinna Township, with its relatively large number of lakes, see itself as continuing to be an attractive destination for lakeshore residents - many of which are spending substantial sums of money to upgrade old cabins and make this either their year-round home or a substantial vacation location. While not all solar locations cause conflict with this, Xcel's territory in the Township is very much in the heart of these lakeshore areas. Are there ways to better screen or minimize the visual impact of solar farms/gardens than the typical row or two of trees that may not provide effective screening for at least 10 years as the trees grow and fill out?
2. Corinna Township is also a farming community and has concerns about the loss of good farmland (while also wanting to respect the choice that farmers/landowners are making that want to lease land for a solar farm). Even when farmland doesn't show up as "prime" in the soil survey, it can be productive with irrigation. There is concern about breaking up farmland to the point where it can't be productive - even beyond the boundaries of a solar farm. There isn't so much a question here, unless there are strategies you use to minimize this loss that you can communicate to the Township.
3. I have pulled a few articles that relate to the solar community program and solar in general (see below) and sent them out to the committee. These articles talk about the benefits of solar, but also some of the economic challenges in terms of cost per kWh compared to other sources. If the economic challenges cause changes in state law, or Xcel is approved for the lower rates they are apparently asking for (rates paid to solar developers) by the state, how would this impact solar gardens that have already been approved. In other words, if the Township approves solar gardens and they are built and then the finances don't continue to be profitable, what will happen with the solar farm?
4. Related to #3 - the declining amount of federal tax credit in the next few years would seem to have a big impact on the feasibility of solar gardens. What happens if those tax credits are allowed to be reduced as currently planned? Will already built solar gardens be affected at all? Or would it only mean that new solar gardens would be less likely to be constructed. Do you have any insight on whether the tax credits will be extended or not?
5. A 25-35 year time frame is obviously a significant amount of time. With solar technology changing fairly rapidly, uncertainty about the stability financial incentives and state laws, what risks are landowners hosting a site and the township taking on if the drivers that make solar gardens feasible go away?
6. The Township would likely want to require regular (probably annually) reviews of an approved interim use permit to make sure that required screening is still in place (i.e. trees are alive and growing), weeds are properly controlled, fencing is well-maintained, etc.. The implication of an unfavorable review is that more would need to be spent on replacing trees, fixing fencing, controlling weeds, etc. (or in the extreme that the interim use permit could be pulled for continued non-compliance with conditions). Are those issues common with existing sites you have developed and are those costs accounted for in your feasibility studies?
7. The solar farm south of Annandale has "changed hands" several times as we understand it. Would any of your solar gardens likely be sold to another operator and what steps do you take to ensure that any screening requirements, etc. are

properly communicated to them? Would the Township be provided with new contact information for any issues/problems should that kind of transfer occur?

8. How likely is it that changes to the number of power poles needed would come about as you work through the details with Xcel? Given the Township/Wright County limitations on the number of new poles in the ordinance, if these changes were to occur, are you prepared to stick to the limitations and go underground instead?

Thank you. If you are unable to attend the meeting, feel free to submit written comments on the above questions/concerns or on anything else you would like. Otherwise, please confirm whether the time and day still work for you. We aren't planning on setting up a video or audio conference to call in at this point.

Previously mentioned articles sent out to the Township's subcommittee:

Xcel webpage about the Solar Rewards Community Program: https://www.xcelenergy.com/programs_and_rebates/residential_programs_and_rebates/renewable_energy_options_residential/solar_available_solar_options/community-based_solar

2013 articles at start of solar garden program:

<https://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/Latest-News-Wires/2013/0927/Solar-garden-Model-T-of-renewable-energy>

<http://www.startribune.com/new-minnesota-solar-mandate-law-will-give-power-companies-a-jolt/208915221/>

2018 article about the economics of solar gardens: <http://www.startribune.com/complicated-economics-of-community-solar-gardens-subject-of-debate/503575142/>

2019 article about why Xcel says solar gardens (community solar) isn't meeting the goals set out in 2013: <https://www.mpnews.org/story/2019/03/01/xcel-to-state-community-solar-programs-needs-overhaul>

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