



Zoning Board of Appeals – Town of Spencer

Minutes

Zoning Board of Appeals Meeting
Tuesday, February 11, 2014 at 7:15 PM
McCourt Social Hall
Memorial Town Hall

Zoning Board Members Present: Dee Kresco, Allan Collette and Robert Emerson
Zoning Board Member Absent: Albert Drexler
Staff present: Michelle Buck, Town Planner, Brynn Johnson ODIS Jr. Clerk

Ms. Kresco opens the meeting at 7:15pm

1. 7:15 Open Meeting

Call to Order
Open Meeting Law Compliance
Roll Call

2. Special Permit- Applicant: SJA Solar LLC. Owner: Cistercian Abbey of Spencer, Inc. Location: 167 North Spencer Road, Spencer Assessor's Map R49-2, R48-5, R49-1, R52-6, R59-1 and R53-2. The applicant is requesting a special permit for the construction of a roughly 17.5 megawatt ground level solar farm on the Abbey property. The property is located within the Rural Residential zoning district.

Mr. Collette read the application.

Steven Plonsker, Solterra Project Developer, gives the background history of this project. In 2011 the Abbey looked at their financial need and decided they need to do something to supplement their income so they approached Solterra to see if a solar farm would be possible. They discovered they would need National Grid to build an express feeder to connect this solar farm to the closest sub-station which is the Treasure Valley substation. National Grid issued their approval and final impact study in April of 2013. They ran into difficulties with the state solar programs. They missed the deadline for last year's state programs for renewable energy credits and net-metering. They would like to take part in the next wave of state programs which will start in March or April. Before they can "get in line" for these programs they will need Town approvals and major permits in place.

It was expensive to get the interconnection with National Grid. Therefore in order for the solar farm to be profitable it has to be this large they cannot reduce the size. Father Robert helped plan where the panels would go so they are removed from the daily activities of the Monks.

Mr. Plonsker says this project is not only good for the environment but its also good for the Town. They have estimated the Town will benefit by about \$150,000 or more a year through a combination of taxes and net-metering benefits.

Mr. Collette asks if the new feeder line will go out from the Abbey to the north. Mr. Plonsker says no the plan is to go south on Alta Crest Road then connect to lines on Route 31 it will head north from there.

Father Vincent says the Abbey needs this solar farm to improve their financial situation. They have looked into many other options such as a wind turbine. However the Abbey wasn't a good location for a turbine so they turned to solar energy. They began with a few other companies but Solterra was the only one willing to work with them to get the needed upgrades from National Grid. They have met with all the Brothers and they all agreed this is good for the Abbey and they support the project. It is a way to environmentally-consciously do something with their land.

Mr. Emerson asks if the lines will be above ground. Mr. Plonsker says yes. Mr. Emerson asks if the electricity has to be turned into alternating current. Mr. Plonsker says yes. They will have multiple inverters on the site. The total solar farm will be broken up into 11 smaller sub-farms; each one will have an inverter.

Mr. Plonsker explains in Massachusetts the 11 sub-farms are considered separate facilities but they will all connect and enter the same feeder line. The farm is set up this way to comply with the state and National Grids regulations. Mr. Graves shows the layout of the 11 sub-farms they will run along Alta Crest Road. Alta Crest Road was abandoned by the Town at the 1986 Town meeting.

Mr. Emerson asks Ms. Buck if the Board can object to one of the 11 farms, or do the farms have to be approved as a whole. Ms. Buck explains the Board can alter their approval as they see fit.

Larry Schuyler states he an abutter representing the Boy Scouts and he also lives in Oakham. He is a retired National Grid engineer and helps explains some of National Grids regulations as to why the farm needs to be broken up into 11 small farms.

Ms. Buck asks if any of this solar development will be visible from North Spencer Road (Rt. 31). Mr. Graves says he does not believe it will be visible from Rt. 31. The only farm that is near Rt. 31 is the southernmost farm and even that farm is about 400 feet from the road and they will leave a wooded buffer.

Mr. Collette asks where the inverters will be. Mr. Graves says each farm will have one or more inverters and each farm will be enclosed by a fence.

Mr. Collette asks if there will be a manager on site. Mr. Graves Plonsker says they will only have someone onsite as needed. It will be monitored remotely and a crew will go out as needed and to cut the grass a few times a year.

Ms. Kresco asks what their time line is. Mr. Plonsker says they hope to be able to start this spring and the project will take about a year to finish maybe a year and a half.

Ms. Kresco opens the hearing to the public.

Warren Bock of Paxton is representing Treasure Valley Boy Scout Camp, the neighbor of the Abbey to the north. He states Treasure Valley is in the process of building their 6MW solar farm on 42 acres in Rutland, so they fully support the Abbey. He gives a detailed overview of the solar project at Treasure Valley.

Ray Griffin also with the Boy Scouts says he is in favor of the Abbey solar project. He goes over the educational benefits the solar array/solar energy provides the Scouts. He tells the Abbey they should think about opening this solar site to local school kids to educate them on solar power.

Larry Schuyler also fully supports the project. He agrees that schoolchildren should be educated on solar power and this site would be good for education.

Mr. Collette asks how many homes could this development power. Mr. Plonsker says roughly 3,000.

Ms. Kresco asks if there are any other comments from the public. There are none.

Mr. Collette recommends a site visit. The Board agrees they would like to visit the site to get a better idea of the layout of where the panels will be. Mr. Graves recommends they view the site from Alta Crest Road by car. Walking the whole site would take all day.

The Board plans to meet Father Robert in the Abbey gift shop parking lot Saturday February 22, 2014 at 10:00am. Father Robert will give them a tour of the site. This meeting will be posted.

MOTION: Mr. Collette makes a motion to continue the hearing to March 11, 2014. And have a site visit on February 22, 2014 at 10:00am. Mr. Emerson seconds. VOTE is 3-0 in favor.

Minutes- from 12/10/2014 and 01/14/2014. The Board agrees to hold the minutes until Mr. Drexler is present to vote on them.

Adjournment: with no further discussion the meeting is adjourned.

Submitted By: Brynn Johnson, ODIS Junior Clerk

Approved by the Zoning Board of Appeals on 4/8/2014

List of Documents used on February 11, 2014:

Items mailed to ZBA members prior to meeting:

- Agenda
- Memo from Michelle Buck, Town Planner dated 2/06/2014
- Minutes from 12/10/2014 and 01/14/2014
- Special Permit Application and Plans for Abbey Solar
- Project Narrative for Abbey Solar
- Memo from Steve Tyler to Michelle Buck dated 2/5/14

Items submitted to ZBA members at the meeting:

- large color copy of site plan, showing location of panels