

Energy committee AN Column for March 2024- Update on Municipal Solar Working Groups

In November of last year the Energy Committee completed the Solar Planning process and held a Community Solar Forum. Since then we have been busy and this month's Energy Committee column will provide an update on our work.

At the community forum we put out a call for volunteers for a Residential Solar Working Group and a Municipal Solar Working Group and you responded! We have been meeting for 3 months now and have a lot to report.

The Municipal Solar Working Group (MSWG) has 6 members. We started with the list of municipal buildings and properties discussed in the Solar Action plan and prioritized those which have high energy use on site, are on 3 phase power lines (which can accommodate larger solar installations), and have either roofs good for solar or space for a ground mount system. We have identified several good options for solar and have been working with town boards and committees responsible for those properties to identify next steps and factors to consider. We have been looking at funding opportunities including a DEP gap grant, an MVP (municipal vulnerability preparedness) grant, and funding for solar through the Climate Leaders Program through DOER (Department of Energy Resources) mentioned in last month's column.

The Wastewater Treatment Plant has emerged as probably the best municipal solar option. The plant is the highest electricity user, costing \$16K/year due to the pumps running continuously. The site is on 3 phase power and the field surrounding the facility could accommodate an approximately 54w system which would be needed to cover the plant's use even with consideration taken to avoid areas of the field closest to the river due to wetlands protection. The DEP gap grant would be perfect for this project however that grant program does not seem to be being offered this year.

The Belding Library is the second highest energy user in part because it is home to the broadband hub. The library's roof is not a good option for solar due to being part slate and also being prone to leaks. There is a possibility of putting a tracking array behind the library to cover part of their bills (there may not be enough space for a big enough array to completely cover their bills). Energy Committee chair Alex Osterman had an initial meeting with the Library Trustees to discuss this and how it might be coordinated with their longer term plans for the library grounds.

Sanderson Academy and the Town Garage are near to each other and both have standing seam metal roofs excellent for solar. However, they are not on 3 phase power thus any solar installation would be limited in size. However they are very close to 3 phase power now that Eversource extended the 3 phase power lines along rt 116 towards Plainfield. The school is literally 4 poles away from the 3 phase power and it is unclear how much it would cost to extend the 3 phase lines that far. The MSWG (Municipal Solar Working Group) will be investigating further.

Looking at the Community Solar Survey done last year it seems that ultimately it may be beneficial for the town to do a number of municipal solar projects. The key factor seems to be funding and finding a way to move forward with solar, which WILL ultimately save the town money, without a large up front cost to unduly burden taxpayers. The MSWG continues to explore options for grant funding.

The **Residential Solar Working Group** has 9 members. The group is taking a different approach from the 2016 Solarize program. They are working to offer residents a choice of installers and asking installers who wish to participate if they are willing to offer discounts if multiple families sign up with

them. The working group is asking each installer who wants to participate the same series of questions to help residents better compare and determine which installer may be right for them. The working group is currently collecting responses and will be putting all the information together and hosting a Residential Solar Forum in April for interested community members to learn more, choose an installer, and sign up for a site visit for installations this summer and fall. The group has created its own email solar@ashfield.org. Feel free to email them if you have questions or think you may be interested in participating in this program. Going solar is a great way to do your part to combat climate change AND it will ultimately save you money!

As always feel free to contact us at energy@ashfield.org with any questions, concerns, suggestions, or if you would like to help. We are so thrilled to have 2 solar working groups currently active. Anyone is welcome to attend one of our Energy Committee or Solar Working Group meetings. Next meeting of the Energy Committee will be Monday March 4, 3:45-5 in lower town hall and on zoom.