

Acton Green Advisory Board
Minutes of Meeting
May 7, 2009
Town Hall, Faulkner Hearing Room

Members present: Chris Schaffner (co-chair), Kate Crosby (co-chair), Tom Michelman, Mary Smith, Carol Holley (clerk) Others present: Mary Michelman, John Murray (Ass't Town Manager), JD Head (school facilities director), Paulina Knibbe (Selectman), representative of the GAB's Boxborough counterpart. Guest speaker: Meg Lusardi, Deputy Director, Green Communities Division, MAEEOEA

The meeting opened around 7:15. Mr. Schaffner introduced Ms Ludardi to the committee. Ms Lusardi noted that part of the green communities program is still developing as feedback is received. Some of the items the being worked on for cities and towns are: net metering, solar PV procurement, energy surveys, creating municipal commissions and siting commissions. She gave a slide presentation on the Green Communities program.

Ms Lusardi discussed some of the program features. State commissions are looking at municipal commissions for municipal light plants – no new ones have been built in 50 years. They are looking at the benefits and challenges of municipal light plants. Siting commissions are looking at what can be done to make renewable energy siting work better. There's a state-wide effort for developing contracts for smaller PV projects – in the \$100,000 range. Now towns don't have to go through the procurement process for these smaller projects. Ms Lusardi noted that there is state staff available to answer questions on energy issues, and they are continuing to add to the web site and have on-line tools for cities and towns.

Ms Lusardi noted the DOER programs – there's an energy audit program already in place. There's grants, loans, technical assistance programs, and new clean technology assessments, such as biomass heating and solar hot water. The first queue of communities for energy audits is being finished up and the second queue was closed recently; Acton hasn't signed up yet. Utilities will be ramping up services to cities and towns, up to \$40,000/town to cover municipal buildings; utilities can complement energy audit efforts. She noted that the DOER has oversight authority over ESCOs for cities and towns. Ms Lusardi described a grant program with up to \$10,000,000 available for cities and towns annually, for qualifying communities. To apply for a grant, a town has to first apply to get reviewed according to certain criteria, then have their proposal reviewed. One of the criteria is to have zoning for alternative energy in place with no special permits required – there's a model by-law on the DOE web site. Funding can be for generation, R&D, etc. Draft qualification criteria are also on the web site.

Massachusetts will put out an energy reporting system at no cost to towns – it's automatic downloads of data from web sites. They are looking at energy use, not greenhouse gas emissions, but those do figure in. Energy use includes buildings, street lights, and vehicles (not heavy-duty vehicles). If a town already has an energy-saving plan that is older than two years, a new plan must be drafted.

Ms Lusardi noted that adoption of the “stretch code”, which is an optional building code for towns and has more stringent requirements than the baseline Mass. Building Code; adoption needs to be done to qualify for grants. She described the stretch code in more detail and took questions about it – this document is still in the comment/redrafting phase and should be ready for implementation in the next 3-6 months. Ms Lusardi also noted that the DOER is providing technical assistance on stimulus fund grants. Transparency in measurement and verification on grant awards will be practiced.

Ms Knibbe noted that Acton was having a special town meeting on June 23, and associated with that is a solar panel project on the sewage treatment plant – how would this project fit in? She explained that there is potential for expansion of the sewer district at that time. Mr. Murray noted there’s a state revolving fund that will fund energy efficiency projects for sewer plants. Right now, the cost-benefit ratio isn’t there. Mr. Schaffner asked what the town would see as a good return; Mr. Murray replied, it depends who you’re talking to – a ten year pay-back. The interest rate is unknown, but Mr. Murray thought it was 2%. For a \$200,000 annual cost we can do \$140,000 in energy savings. Part of the problem is that we don’t get tax credits. It’s a 30-year bond, \$200,000/year – the town is trying to determine if it’s feasible. Users of the plan must get the savings because they have to pay for it. Only active users would be charged for the alternative energy installation – it might require a bylaw change. The site has a little bit of wind (Adams St. treatment plant site) but not enough; the project would have to be all solar.

Mr. Schaffner noted that in calculating return on investment, it wasn’t known what energy prices would be in the future, say 10 years. Instead of the town owning the panels, some other entity could do it and the town could buy the electricity – then a third party could do the installation. Mr. Michelman felt it would still be expensive. Mr. Schaffner felt it would be a long payback, and thought the renewable energy trust fund could help get things over the payback hurdle. Mr. Michelman noted that the federal grant renewable energy bonds are 0%, but there’s a cost for issuing.

Ms Knibbe said if there is a different funding mechanism we might not have the problem of making the users pay for it. A general discussion of how to fund the project ensued, as well as considering a solar array on the landfill. Mr. Head noted that town meeting already approved a roof for Douglas school, and maybe solar panels could go there because it has good light exposure. Mr. Murray explained that the federal bond had to do with water and sewer projects. Mr. Murray discussed some of the difficulties in dealing with stimulus package funding opportunities.

Mr. Murray related that the town has been looking into alternatively fueled vehicles and has been exploring a private-public partnership for a fueling station at the transfer station site. There are a lot of things we should be working together with the schools on doing; he can bring some details to the group’s next meeting. He noted three projects – vehicles themselves, particulate retrofits for diesels, and alternative fueled vehicles, for which you can get \$2,000/vehicle back from federal stimulus money.

Mr. Michelman noted that there are low cost loans for energy efficiency that look good.

Messrs. Murray and Head will be added to Ms Lusardi's mailing list for announcements, etc. regarding the state grants program.

The committee's next meeting was noted to be May 21, 6-8 p.m., in town hall room 121. By acclamation, the meeting adjourned at 8:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Carol Holley
Clerk