

Town of Whitewater Town Board Meeting Minutes  
Thursday, March 15, 2018  
9:00am

Present: Lowell Hagen, Robert Strand, Carrie Hintz  
Absent: Norman Prusener

Bob made a motion to move approve the agenda, seconded by Lowell. Motion passed unanimously.

The minutes of the March 14, 2018 town board meeting were reviewed. Bob made a motion to approve the minutes as written, seconded by Lowell. The motion passed unanimously.

Solar panel discussion with Ranger Power – Jeff Rauh and Andrew Hamilton from Ranger Power wanted to introduce the town to the company and their proposed project. They're in the early stages and this scale of a project takes many years. In 2016 they started researching the grid and are currently reaching out to landowners. This project is preliminarily for 125 megawatts, which is wholesale power generation. Lowell said he is one of the people asked to put some land into the project. Some people have already signed leases, but they are looking for about 1200 acres leased total. Next step is technical studies that takes 3-6 months or longer to determine ideal project size. Bob asked how many households 125 megawatt produces and Andrew estimated 10,000-20,000 range, but he'd have to confirm. Lowell said there are enormous projects out west that are 4-5 times larger than this project.

Point of interconnection is an existing overhead line to one of the lines west of the Wisconsin Street substation. Power flows on the transmission line. The panels are about 5-6' in size. The structures are put onto I-beams that are driven into the ground (no concrete bases) and the highest the structures would be early or late in the day at maximum tilt at 12-15'. Solar panels track the sun east to west during the day. Solar panels have a dark silken so it's warm and will melt the snow so that it slides off.

Lowell checked with the county zoning and Ranger just needs a conditional use permit with them and the town is under county zoning. Bob asked what happens in 15 years when they aren't used or are out dated. Andrew said solar is attractive because it doesn't change much when you move east to west so you can bring it much closer to load centers. We should be seeing more solar in the Midwest. Estimated useful life of 35 years and equipment manufacturers warrant equipment for 25 years, with option to extend. Lease agreement and state permitting will include a documented reclamation plan so that the land is returned to its prior form at the end of its useful life. Lease agreements with land owners are 40 years. Solar investment is on front end and costs are minimal during long-term operation, so there's no volatility to cause unplanned radical changes. Lowell said contract with electric company is only for 20-25 years. Andrew said there's been an over 80% decline in the cost of solar in the last 8 years, which is why it's more available in the Midwest now even though we don't have as much sun as other places.

Biggest benefit is to those leasing the land. Broader community benefits from 1) including native vegetation that is habitat for native pollinators that will help local farmers, 2) jobs will come to the area during construction and trickle down economic effects, 3) several long-term jobs once construction is complete, and 4) the land today is currently in the farmland protection program resulting in lower tax revenue. The project makes that go away. The solar facility is taxed on a generating licensing fee schedule as a certain % of their revenue at state level and that money is sent back to the county and municipality. So revenue will be higher. There will be an economic impact study that they'll share when it's done. Basically, there will be more tax revenue generated for the community than currently through the farmland. No plan to pay the municipality outright. Bob asked about workers to wash panels, mow grass, etc. Ranger wants a full-time mowing and vegetation control person, possible even sheep to graze. Panel washing is generally 1-4 times per year depending upon the amount of dust.

State permitting takes several years. Will begin construction in 2020-2021. Once break ground, weather permitting, takes under a year to build. Minimal concrete under inverted stations to elevate if needed. Heavy equipment on roads is pile drivers and semis, but it's less construction activity than a windfarm. Lowell said we have fragile township roads and he's worried about the damage to Bluff Road, which is where a lot of the work would be done. Andrew said their agreement would include repairing any damaged roads and ongoing maintenance, which could be discussed as it gets closer, whether through bonding or some other means. Andrew said that can all be discussed as the project progresses. Lowell said townships who have wind turbines receive substantial funds. Andrew said turbines were highly subsidized to try new things, but solar doesn't have state subsidization, but there is a federal tax credit that starts to sunset in 2020. The pricing is very competitive so there isn't funding to pay the municipality. Nearby projects in other areas of Wisconsin, but can't discuss due to competitive concerns. Lowell said there's one in Darien that their competitor is doing. There is an operating project that their affiliate manages in Minnesota / Wisconsin border. Lowell and Ranger Power doesn't have any projects in Wisconsin but they'll look for a project that would be similar that the board could view to get an idea of what ours would like.

Lowell asked about health concerns. Andrew said 1) the panels are exactly the same technology as on a house and those have been cleared for residential use and no evidence that it creates health issues, 2) not any higher voltage than overhead power lines in the community and Ranger's wires will be buried underground to inverters. Generally the whole area is fenced. It's not high voltage equipment, but it is electronics so they keep it protected per code. Power will be sold to power company. They don't see any reason using solar power would negatively affect rates, but they don't have any control over the power company rates to consumers. This project isn't currently committed to any one utility, but they've spoken with all of the utility providers. Lowell said when it's set up and operational, Ranger Power will sell it. Andrew said Ranger is a development company and another operation would come in and purchase it once complete.

Andrew said FFA has regulations about solar panels. Jeff said people have concerns with wind turbines injuring birds, but no conclusive evidence that solar panels affect birds. Bob said we have a lot of wildlife in the area and people would like the wildlife corridor to not be impacted. Lowell said they just fence them in and the wildlife moves around. Lowell said he can't speak for the board, but he thinks he'll lease land to the project. Farm bureaus and other agricultural groups are supporting solar because in the long run they're protecting the land from becoming housing or strip malls. Jeff said this is voluntary for land owners to lease land to the project. Lowell said the lease money is 5 times what land rent is. Andrew said it's private capital used to leased private land. There isn't any eminent domain or anything like that because they aren't a power company. This can't be forced on anyone.

Andrew emphasized this is early in the project. It's not a sure thing because it's a long path. Their way of doing business is to come in early and be transparent. Ranger wants to engage the community early and often so that the community supports the project. Jeff asked if there are folks in the area that the town would like them to talk to. Board said we post all meeting notices and everyone is invited to attend meetings to get information. Ranger likes the forums, but they will take the time to make personal contact with anyone who is very interested in what's going on in the township so they can get accurate information and questions answered. Lowell said we have farmland owners and the Whitewater Lake area. The farmland owners are the ones Ranger is interested in. Andrew said once farmland is all leased, they go to the neighbors and talk. Ranger is available to answer questions, make formal presentations, etc. They'll stay in touch and provide updates on the project progress. Board will send any concerned citizens to Ranger to get their questions answered.

Other town business – None

Bob made a motion to adjourn at 9:57am, seconded by Lowell. The motion passed unanimously.

*Respectfully submitted by Carrie Hintz, Clerk/Treasurer*