TOWN OF CHESTER

PLANNING COMMISSION

August 11, 2025, Minutes

Commission Members Present: Jeff Holden, Scott MacDonald, Cathy Hasbrouck, and Hugh Quinn at Town Hall. Carl Henshaw via Zoom.

Staff Present: Preston Bristow, Town Planner and Zoning Administrator, at Town Hall; Susan Bailey, Recording Secretary, via Zoom.

Visitors Present: Lee Gustafson, Randy Miles, Bill Lindsay, and Robert Nied at Town Hall; and Anne Henshaw, Erin Ladd of MARC, Tim Roper, Thomas Hand, Mark McKeon, Gene Czarnecki, and Steve Mancuso via Zoom.

Call to Order

Chair Hugh Quinn called the meeting to order at 6:45 p.m.

Agenda Item 1, Review Savage Solar Energy LLC proposed 2.75 MW Solar Project.

Thomas Hand of MHG Solar introduced Savage Solar, a 2.75 MW solar project on Route 103 South, that would occupy approximately 14 acres on the northeast side of the road on the south side of town and consist of about 7,000 panels. The site was selected for: proximity to existing infrastructure and relatively easy to build on. The site was an agriculture field, relatively flat, ideal for construction, and provides access to the power grid and along Route 103, minimizing the need for new powerlines and roads. Most of the site is screened from Route 103 by a buffer of trees. On the east and north sides are railroad tracks and the river, both which provide some screening or buffer. They have bid the project into GMP who currently has an RFP open for solar projects. They would sell power to GMP to use for their customers, of whom many are Chester residents.

Tim Roper noted he was there as an interested citizen, not a Select Board member. He has experience in the solar industry and thought it looked like a good project. Tim wondered where the company was headquartered and what other Vermont projects they had done. Their offices are in Manchester, VT, which is where Thomas grew up. They have done 25 projects in Vermont, which include Windsor, Barre, and Rutland, among others. They have done projects in other areas across the state. Tim said it was great to hear and wanted to know how they felt about using local contractors and subcontractors if they were qualified and capable. Thomas said it was a specific type of construction. For things like moving dirt and other things people know how to do, they try to be local. They may use Hunter Excavating out of Londonderry and pull labor locally, but they require specialized firms for installation. Generally, most of their labor comes from all over Vermont. Tim understood, having spent a dozen years in the industry, but was thinking of sitework, screening, plantings, fencing, and maintenance. Thomas said finding someone local usually costs

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less because they are closer to the site and something they consider. Tim wondered if there would be an RFP process. Thomas said for the items Tim mentioned, they start by looking locally. For specialized installation, they would likely use contractors they've worked with already. Thomas wasn't aware of anyone in Chester. Tim was sure there were people locally who would be interested in the other items.

Scott MacDonald was concerned about flooding and damage that could be caused, as that area had logs, trees, and shed debris from the last flood. Scott wondered if it was a 100-year flood zone and it was. Scott was concerned 100-year flood zones were happening more often. Given the solar panels were only one foot above, Scott was concerned about damage, debris, and groundwater contamination and hoped the town and engineers would be aware. Thomas said they had already received a Flood Hazard Area and River Corridor General Permit from the State.

Lee Gustafson asked for a description of the racking system. Thomas said they hadn't finalized and purchased it, but he expected it would be installed by using ground screws and go down about 7 feet. It would be a fixed array. The substation, which is on the north side of town, doesn't require significant upgrades and, what is necessary, MHG will pay for.

Carl Henshaw, as a citizen and not as a Planning Commission member, asked Thomas to walk them through the community benefits. Thomas said the direct benefit was ongoing tax revenue generated, some jobs related to construction, and maintenance. Carl was concerned about a big solar field being there and not generating a lot for the community and thought the tax revenue was about $600. Thomas said the tax revenue was much more and while construction was happening, there would be additional economic activity in town by way of gas, food, and rooms needed during construction. If Vermont wants power generated in the state, it must be built somewhere.

Robert Nied was supportive of a commercial solar project in Chester and saw an opportunity. The Select Board had the foresight to purchase a solar facility and Chester has over 150 homes that are powered by solar and feed the grid. This project will feed the grid for Green Mountain Power, who has been good at integrating residential and commercial solar. The net result is they can end up with a stronger grid than many other places. By embracing solar, they can set an example for others in the region and state and the idea of converting fossil fuels to renewable. Robert thought the project would make the grid more stable and reliable and noted tariffs could impact the hydro power from Canada and saw it as beneficial for Vermont and Chester.

Randy Miles is pro-business but was concerned about flooding and wondered how debris would be recaptured, who was responsible for cleanup, and the cost. As part of their application to the Public Utilities Commission, they are required to have a decommissioning plan in place and money set aside in a fund to clean the area up at the end of its life. The fund is bankruptcy remote. Randy wondered how they recaptured the debris. Thomas said they have engineering to make the infrastructure as resistant as possible and go through the state mandated process, obtain a permit specifically to build on the site based on the flood data. If the whole thing is destroyed by a windstorm, or flood, or another act of God, the decommissioning fund would pay for it.

Carl Henshaw clarified where his tax revenue estimate came from and added he was pro-green and loved renewables but wanted to see more of a benefit to Chester. Thomas was talking specifically

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about the solar array and not the taxed land. The array is comparable to putting a building on land and it is assessed, and the solar project would be assessed similarly.

Lee Gustafson wondered if they had discussed a battery system giving more stable power and if the grid was down for a few days, they could power the town with it. Lee was concerned about using agricultural land for projects that aren't agriculture related and was concerned about not being able to feed people if it was being used for solar. Thomas said they have some sites with sheep grazing as a form of vegetation management. Many farmers see that they can get more money for their land selling to solar than growing cattle feed. They have considered batteries and would like to do them, but the benefit accrues to GMP and services they could value and they will need to decide if it's the right spot for them.

Regarding tax revenue, Tim Roper said the town would benefit and receive tax based on the value of the solar array. He was encouraged by using helical piles to install the array and said they were removable at the end of their life, and the land could be reclaimed as agricultural. Thomas agreed but said steel I beams would also be fully removable.

Hugh asked Thomas to talk about screening, and agreed from the south, you couldn't see much of the field when the leaves were on the trees but wondered about when they were off. Thomas said there were some evergreen trees and deciduous trees would lose their leaves and when the leaves are off, small portions will be visible rather than the entire array.

Cathy Hasbrouck looked up the tax bill for Chester Power Partners who has 96 acres on Trebo Road, and they were billed $40,000 for taxes in 2025, $3,000 of which was education tax that goes to the state and $35,000 plus was municipal tax going straight to Chester. Cathy didn't know how to compare the proposed project with this example but noted the tax revenue was substantial and mostly municipal.

Preston Bristow knew the property flooded and some of it had flooded two consecutive years, and ruined corn. Preston had a neighbor call him and wondered when they could begin construction. Thomas said they had seen some of the flooding and where the water went and considered that and thought the earliest construction would begin was a year as they still had to go through the state process, order materials, and mobilize.

Randy Miles wondered who would pay for the maintenance and if it was Green Mountain Power. Thomas said his company was responsible and GMP only pays them for power generated.

Lee Gustafson asked if any soil samples would be collected before construction and if funds were set aside for remediation after the arrays were removed due to the metal in the ground for 20 to 40 years and if ANR was involved. Thomas said ANR were parties to the case, and he had not experienced what Lee was referring to. Thomas said they do soil samples but had never been asked that question.

Hugh followed up on the operational expenses and wondered how long GMP would buy power. Thomas said they would have a contract with GMP for 20 or 25 years as necessary to finance the project.

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Shawn Cunningham asked about tariffs in China affecting their project and if there was a point where the project would be unfeasible. Thomas said tariffs were constantly changing and he couldn't say when that would be. Nobody in the U.S. has purchased Chinese panels for years because they are heavily tariffed. Most of their supply is from Southeast Asia, Africa, the U.S. They had also purchased panels from Turkey and Indonesia and other places. Tariffs on China weren't a concern because they don't purchase much there, but now other countries are getting tariffs, so he couldn't predict. Shawn wondered what would happen if tariffs made it unfeasible and Thomas said they couldn't do the project. It's a 3-to-4-month construction window, so they base it prices at the time. He noted this was the most difficult environment they've operated in.

Scott MacDonald questioned the project being one of multiple corporations and if all their projects were under individual LLCs created for each project. Thomas confirmed. Scott asked if they filed Chapter 11, if they would be responsible for cleanup. Thomas said the decommissioning funds are required to be bankruptcy remote and each project has their own.

Hugh thanked Thomas for the presentation and the good discussion because of it.

Lee Gustafson was concerned about the environmental impacts and thought they should make sure nobody would be impacted down the road from well water, oil leaks, and heavy machinery. Lee thought they should have their finger on the pulse on how it is managed, especially being so close to the river. Lee noted it was under the State's jurisdiction.

Scott MacDonald didn't think the Planning Commission had any jurisdiction. Hugh said they may have some input about the screening. Preston said the Planning Commission could make recommendations to the PUC. The purpose of this meeting was to give the company input, including things they may not have considered.

Jason Rasmussen of MARC said the Public Utilities Commission made the decision, and the town and Regional Planning Commission could intervene in the process, if they chose to. Scott MacDonald didn't think the area to screen was that big. Randy Miles said if they were plastics in the ground, many of the plastics would have chemicals in them. Lee was concerned about the damage a fence could do in the event of a flood. Hugh heard they already were approved by the state, based on design, to build in a floodplain. Preston noted it was a public document so they should be able to view it. Preston agreed that a fence could cause a big mess during a flood. Scott MacDonald wanted to know if the state issued the permit based on an engineering report paid for by the company or state and said the company should be willing to pay for an independent engineering report, if necessary.

Agenda Item 2, Approve July 28, 2025, Meeting Minutes

Cathy moved and Scott seconded the motion to approve the minutes of July 28, 2025. Hugh asked if there were any changes and there were none. The minutes were unanimously approved, as written.

Agenda Item 3, Citizen Comments

There were none.

Agenda Item 4, Update on Future Land Use Map work from MARC

Erin Ladd of MARC said they have been working on Act 181 regional map updates per the statutes passed last summer. They put a summary in a story map form which is a public tool available to everyone. Erin went through the map and explained how to use the tool, and it provides a high-level description. Each category is associated with the Neighborhood Development Area they are seeking. It will provide an opportunity for input from the community. It may be found at the following link: https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/74ab79c0d7ac40f2857dc78b0ecb0198. The yellow, teal, and dark green are more rural and, in the middle, where there is pink, purple, and gold, is where they will focus development. Hugh expected the Planning Commission members to become familiar with the map. Hugh asked if it was appropriate to gather feedback from the members at a future meeting and Erin said the more feedback, the better. Hugh hoped the community would engage with the map and offer a point of view. Erin said that was the idea, and they had simplified the map to the best of their ability. Erin offered to answer questions and provided her email: eladd@marcvt.org. Hugh asked for any questions.

Steve Mancuso said the green machine moved in and he had been watching what other towns were doing. Hugh asked him if he was talking about the solar project and Steve said he was, as well as the solar field the town wanted to buy. Steve wished they would look at other towns who bought into it and had problems. Steve thought the efficiency went down and maintenance went up and was concerned about hazmat issues. Hugh told him he had missed the earlier discussion, and the question was asked and answered in detail and said there were plans for decommissioning a project. Steve apologized for asking about solar during this agenda item.

Tim was impressed by the map and wondered how he could get a link. Erin provided Tim and others with the link.

Jason Rasmussen said statute calls out the land use categories they must use. They're trying to plan for future growth and housing. He asked them to spend some time with the map and provide input. The purples and gold are where they expect development to happen. Hugh wasn't sure how to think about the land use category called transition. Erin said transition and enterprise were interrelated and based on what was previously imposed. Jason said it still needed refinement. Enterprise is industrial parks, prisons, and airports. Jason said transition was optional and for something you want re-developed into something better. Erin hoped to have feedback to the commission within a month. Jason assumed and hoped the town wanted the Tier 1B exemption but would come back to talk with them about it and the Select Board. The hearing is one week from Wednesday and Preston expected they would communicate it then. Scott wanted to make sure the public was aware. Hugh noted they would advertise it. Hugh said it would provide money for development in some areas and other areas may get increased Act 250 oversight. Tim reiterated that getting it out to the public was important, either through the press or social media. Tim said he would look through it and offer feedback. Randy Miles thought the housing project presentation was successful and suggested this be presented the same way. The others agreed it was a good event.

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Agenda Item 5, Adjournment

Scott moved to adjourn, and Cathy seconded the motion. A vote was taken, and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 8:17 p.m.

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