

Minutes: City of Watertown Environment & Energy Efficiency Committee (WE3C)
January 24 2022, 7 p.m., via ZOOM Meeting

Attendees, members and citizens: Jeanne Trubek, Pat Rathbone, Ed Lewis (City Energy Manager), Lauri Murphy, Ellen Menounos, Meredith Fields, Andris, Brian Hebeisen, Ernesta Krackiewicz, Laurel Schwab (Environmental Planner), Dan D'Amico, Linda Relson, Steve Steadman, John Airasian, Jolly Tager

Minutes from the last meeting were approved.

Announcements: Jeanne announced that Eileen Ryan will be presenting "Beyond Plastics" for the First Parish Church, Watertown, a virtual talk on Friday, Jan. 28, at 6:30. Jeanne will send the link.

Watertown Citizens for Peace, Justice, and the Environment meets Wednesday, Jan. 26 and the link is on their website.

Watertown Community Gardens will sponsor a presentation by the Northeast Organic Farmers Association on Feb. 2.

On Thursday, Jan. 27 at 6:30 there will be a community forum presented by Alexandria Real Estate about their development of the Watertown Mall. There will be a second meeting on March 1st. Jeanne has sent the link for the presentation and all are encouraged to attend and to press Alexandria to construct buildings that at least approach net zero and to suggest transportation improvements that would be available to their employees and to residents of Watertown.

Energy Manager's Report-Ed Lewis

Alexandria did a quick presentation for the town and Laurel and Ed met with two of their engineers. Alexandria will increase open and green space, but they are taking down some mature trees and the trees they are planting will be smaller. They plan to exceed our solar requirement; they are aiming for LEED gold, improving on the silver LEED standard required. Ed suggested we stay "on" them and keep going to the meetings. He thought their presentation was pretty good.

Ed said that the meeting laws allowing zoom will be extended to April 1, 2022.

Watertown Electricity Choice

Ed said that with the high Eversource rates, our program was getting a lot of action. People who declined it before are signing up and there is some interest in 100% renewables. This may change when the Eversource rates go down for the summer.

Environmental Planner's report -Laurel Schwab

Laurel said that Laura Wiener is leaving March 1st. The Transportation Manager has been an advocate for chargers and has been working with the DPW to get grants to increase charging for the city. There will be three more level three chargers for the municipal fleets; they will be at the DPW and are not for residents' use. We need to advocate for EV's or at least plug-in hybrids for the municipal fleet - regular hybrids are dying. Electric pickup trucks are coming soon.

The ribbon cutting ceremony and open house and tour at the Hosmer will be Tuesday, February 1st at 4 pm. Then phase 2 of the Hosmer project will begin with taking down the old school, getting the solar arrays done, and redoing the playing fields.

The Cambridge River Watershed Association is working to get the Watertown dam removed for ecological and resilience reasons. There have been meetings with town officials and Steve Magoon invited the CRWA to present to the Conservation Committee. Many of the attendees at this meeting had been to the fall tour of the dam site. It will take awhile to get this project through the state bureaucracy, but there don't seem to be many good reasons not to do it.

Laurel reiterated the call for six members of the public to apply for the Recycling Committee.

The Arsenal Mall abuts the Cambridge Watertown Greenway and that project offers the chance to enhance the natural habitat and to do education through signage, etc. Alexandria is on board with all of that.

Climate Action Plan update

WE3C was forwarded the document outlining the current plan and members of WE3C sent feedback. There was general agreement that the plan is going in the right direction. The consultants are working on the action items and then they will submit the plan for public comment.

Jeanne asked how long the working groups would keep working and the answer is that they are just in place to do the plan. With the plan complete (basically now with perhaps some more comments) they will be finished with their work.

After the public is sent the document, there will be a three week public comment period and then the consultants will need two weeks to incorporate the feedback; we will get it back at the end of March.

Jeanne said that she sent letters to invite all City Councilors to one of our meetings. She said only Tony responded. John Airasian is with us tonight.

Ellen suggested everyone look at the webinar on the dam.

Ernesta asked if there were any arguments against removing the dam and again they seem to be a mention of narrowing the width of the river and some impact on structures along the edge; someone brought up aesthetic concerns.

Meredith said the dam is an ongoing flood hazard. John Airasian said we need to remind people that this project is not going to be paid for by the residents of Watertown.

Working groups

Net zero: reported with the CAP and Watertown Mall discussion

Schools: Ellen talked about outreach to the schools. She will thank the principal for her tour of the Cuniff and will reiterate that she wants our committee to be a resource for the schools. Ellen will attend the open house at the Hosmer as will many of us.

Transportation: Deb Peterson, Ernesta, and Jeanne made suggestions about transportation to the CAP and will speak at the meeting about how Alexandria can contribute to transportation issues in Watertown.

Ordinances: Meredith said that though she had promised a draft of the tree ordinance for this meeting, it is still a work in progress. The committee is still hashing out the details of how to proceed. She wants to get feedback from the Councilors before submitting the ordinance to City Council. The final draft will be ready in a month or two. She hopes that the ordinance and the CAP will dovetail. There are no other ordinances under review.

Tree warden

Greg did support a tree ordinance and he is writing to the City Council about this. Laurel Schwab said his job has been posted.

Brian asked if there was a queue of ordinances after the Tree Ordinance. Next comes Artificial Turf, then, Brian hoped, an ordinance to deal with the small gas engines used in landscape maintenance and generators. Brian suggested looking at these engines, not because of their CO2 emissions, but because of other types of pollution. Such an ordinance could be part of our move towards electrification. Jolly will send some research she has on this topic to the committee.

Other items

Jeanne asked how the plan to redo Arsenal Street impacts the construction of the Arsenal Mall: how do they fit together? She will ask the DPW.

Lauri asked Ed if any of the grant money was going to public chargers for citizens and Ed said yes, the ones in the library parking lot. They are free after parking hours end.

Meredith asked if we have data on the use of the public chargers; Ed thought they were pretty well used from what he sees going through the parking lot.

A question was asked about using utility poles for chargers. Ed thought they were less good in New England. Jolly mentioned that Medford does use the utility poles with a phone app to bring the charger down from a height at which it can't be vandalized, much as they had to do in California.

Jeanne asked: What about the senior center for chargers? That wasn't done because it was not clear at the time what the plans would be for the schools' construction and reconstruction. Hence the public chargers are in the library parking lot.

The next meeting of the committee is on February 28 because of the holiday on February 21. Remember that there is a second Alexandria public meeting on March 1, so letters from the committee must be ready to be voted on at the February 28th meeting.

The meeting was adjourned a few minutes early at 8:25 pm.