

Minutes of the Worthington Planning Board

2.11.26

Planning Board Meeting

The meeting began at 6:00pm at the Conwell School.

Present: Nestor Matthews, Kathy Ford, Kate Bavelock, Bart Niswonger

The ANR subdivision application for 138 Ridge Road was approved and signed by the Board.

The Report for the Town's Annual Report written by the Chair on behalf of the Board was reviewed. Kathy Ford made a motion to approve, Nestor Matthews seconded and it was unanimous in favor.

It was agreed that the Board would review the Preliminary Subdivision Plans for 190 Ridge Road and 105 Old Post Road at their next meeting. Explanatory material has been posted online.

Public Hearing on Solar Project at 190 Ridge Road

Present: Nestor Matthews, Kathy Ford, Kate Bavelock, Bart Niswonger, Robin Stein, and Charley Rose. On behalf of Bluesky: Mike Zhe, Brie Fortmiller, Olivia Crosby, Matt Quinn and Tad Hauer (remote). See additional list of members of the public in attendance.

The Public hearing was opened at 6:30pm. Bart Niswonger made introductory remarks. Mike Zhe presented Bluesky's responses to the most recent round of questions (See BlueWave submission dated 2.5.26).

Nestor Matthews questioned the fencing choice and options.

1. Height: Farmland in Worthington is mostly used for haying and grazing. The fencing typically used is an electric fence at 3' tall, or no fence at all. We understand that fencing is a requirement for solar, either required by code, insurers, or inspectors. Still, we have heard of solar projects in Mass with no fencing or 5-6' fencing. Can you tell us where your minimum requirements come from and what they are?

Answer: The submittal shows plans for an 8' wire fixed knot fence, and suggests Bekaert SolidLock Pro 30 as an example of what may be used. Electrical facility code is a 7 ft fence, and 8ft is the available off the shelf product that can be procured.

2. Are the vertical posts proposed galvanized or wood?

Answer: Wood

3. There is concern about birds flying into taller fencing, with wider openings near the top being preferred. Would you be open to exploring other pattern types to mitigate the bird issue? Answer: Yes, they are open.

4. Another concern is the passage of small animals through the field. It is impossible to keep out mice, voles and moles, but if they are allowed to be there without allowing their predators in, you could have a population explosion problem. It appears that foxes, bobcats, coyotes, and raccoons only need 6-8" of clearance to get through. One proposal we heard, was to raise the fencing up to allow for this. Another proposal is to create openings at a standard distance apart to allow for animal passage. Have you done this anywhere, and would you be open to exploring this?

Answer: They have provided openings on other projects, and were requested to provide more information on those options.

5. The plans currently show all fencing to be on the property line, which has the most visual impact from the roads and adjacent properties. With a 50' setback and a need for 30' clearance for equipment, is there a reason you couldn't set the fence back in that first 20' of space?

Answer: They want to leave the open land as-is for haying (and to maintain the historic layout of the field, so that is why the fence is shown at the outer limit. They were open to more discussion on this item.

The group opposing the project made a presentation. (presentation attached) They focused on the priority concerns of:

1. Risk to water resources
2. Insurance risks
3. Noise
4. Emergency preparedness

Bart Niswonger asked Mike Zhe to provide more specifics on a contaminant release issue at one of their projects in Douglas. Zhe will provide a memo of the specifics.

Bart Niswonger asked Mike Zhe what a typical noise study looks like. Zhe will provide a follow-up memo.

Kathy Ford asked what the slope is and how it effects the project. Olivia Crosby responded that while a section of the site has a 15% slope, that section does not have panels and panels are only on the sections of slope with a 0 – 10% grade. Abutter Ann Lagoy disputes that fact and referred to town maps showing a 25% slope on that land and will send the map in question to the Chair.

Richard Mansfield make a case for the importance to solar energy to mitigate climate change.

Paul Sena pointed out that the project is estimated to benefit the town approximately \$40,000 - \$60,000 a year if approved, without the cost of educating children which a residential development would add to the town budget. He said this use is consistent with farming and keeps the tax rates down. As a veteran member of the fire department, he is not worried about emergency issues should they arise.

Julie Grome discussed an incident in 2023 when Ringville lost water for several days which demonstrates the limits of our Water Fire District when problems arise.

Tami Parkinson opposes the destruction of the rural landscape and community safety. She requested the Charley Rose use the robo-call system for meetings such as this one as some people are not online. Charley said he would consider increased use of the system, but needs to find a balance as to how many calls are welcome before it becomes an annoyance, and that meetings are also posted at Town Hall, the Corners and in the Country Journal.

Steve Strom opposes the project, comparing the loss of property values to theft.

Lynn Scott read from an editorial she sent to the Country Journal on property losses at an estimate of 4.8%.

Steven Coyne asked about the transmission lines and connection to the grid – what would it look like, what tree clearing will take place and that this infrastructure was a threat to pedestrian safety. Bart Niswonger explained that Eversource controls what happens off the property in question, not the applicant. The Planning Board is also seeking answers from their technical review team on what that might look like.

Ann Lagoy read a list of negative impacts.

Jen Parrish Hill opposes the project to project the beauty and purity of Watts Stream and the wildlife that relies on it.

Emily Larabee made the point that property rights do not extend to contamination risk and pollution.

Julie Grome highlighted a Senate Bill to address more local control of solar installations which is not moving forward and asked for people to advocate to their state Senator.

Susan Asher advocated to protect the water resources and made a case for financial restitution for loss of property values.

Emily Larabee asked:

1. When we will see the Emergency Response Plan. BlueWave responded: by the next public hearing.
2. Did BlueWave respond to the Board of Health comments? Bart Niswonger answered that they have gone to Technical Review by Pare Consulting first

3. Will they give the full insurance policy. Mike Zhe: we will review and send if possible
4. Who will monitor the BESS? Mike Zhe: It is remotely monitored 24/7 by asset managers at a computer center, primarily in Boston and several other locations in state.

Trip Shaw expressed frustration that the hearings were continuing without Emergency Response Planning, details on the materials and equipment including Safety Data Sheets and other crucial information. He requested the hearing not continue until all information is received. Steve Coyne reiterated that point. Helen Pollard continues to advocate for a denial based on the incomplete application documents.

Karin Muller spoke on the generational impact of this project and made a plea for the ethical care of the earth and the water.

Kate Bavelock made a motion to continue the hearing to March 26 at 6:30pm at the Conwell School. Nestor Matthews seconded. The continuation was approved by voice vote. Kate Bavelock made a motion to adjourn. Nestor Matthews seconded and the adjournment was approved by voice vote.

