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State OKs solar array

By MIKE FAHER
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BRATTLEBORO — The state has given the green light to a 2-megawatt solar project along Interstate 91 in Brattleboro, clearing the way for construction of one of Vermont's largest photovoltaic facilities.

In issuing a certificate of public good to WE 90 Technology Drive LLC, state Public Service Board officials said the project "will not have an undue adverse effect on aesthetics, historic sites, air and water purity, the natural environment, the use of natural resources and the public health and safety."

In short, officials wrote that the solar array will "promote the general good of the state."

The project was proposed last year by Winstanley Enterprises LLC, based in Concord, Mass. Company representatives could not be reached for comment on Monday.

Reportedly, the project could include as many as 8,300 solar panels, though the Public Service Board says the array's "exact wattage, number of panels and panel configuration will be determined at the time of final design and procurement ... by the contractor."

The project site at 90 Technol-

ogy Drive, according to state documents, is a vacant, 15-acre parcel "wedged between Interstate 91 and an industrialized area north of Brattleboro." The Holiday Inn Express sits immediately to the north.

There will be approximately 1,050 poles, buried electric lines, associated electrical equipment and a 600-foot-long access drive.

There were no major objections to the project. From the state's perspective, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets got involved in the permitting process, as did the Department of Public Service and the Agency of Natural Resources.

Locally, Windham Regional Commission reviewed the proposed solar facility and "concluded that the project was consistent with the goals and policies of the regional plan and proposed that the project take steps to mitigate the impacts to the viewshed of travelers on Interstate 91 and the potential loss of prime agricultural soils."

And at the town level, the Public Service Board notes that Brattleboro Planning Commission sought public comment on the solar facility.

See SOLAR ARRAY, Page 5

Solar array

Continued from Page 1

"Comments were received from the Conservation Commission, the Agricultural Advisory Committee, the Town Energy Coordinator and some members of the public," board members wrote. "The majority of the comments were positive, though there were specific concerns about the potential for negative visual impact, glare and future use of agricultural soils at the project site."

Upon hearing of the state's approval of the project on Monday, Brattleboro Selectboard Chairman David Gartenstein noted that there had been aesthetic concerns.

"The town of Brattleboro is in favor of green energy projects and production of energy through renewable sources. Concerns have been expressed about the visual impact of a large solar array placed in a very visible location directly along I-91 in Brattleboro," Gartenstein said.

"The (Public Service Board), however, concluded that public hearings on the project were not necessary," Gartenstein said. "We wish Winstanley the best of success in construction of the project."

In defense of the decision to not hold a public hearing, Public Service Board members pointed to

memorandums of understanding that the solar project's developers reached with the state agencies.

"We appreciate the efforts of all concerned to address these issues and prepare appropriate mitigation requirements," board members wrote.

Because of those memorandums, the Winstanley solar petition "no longer raised substantial issues requiring a hearing, and therefore no hearing was needed," the board's certificate says.

The document, which is available online at <http://psb.vermont.gov/orders>, addresses aesthetic and environmental concerns as well as a variety of other details:

— Aesthetics.

The Public Service Board's order says the project "will not violate a clear, written community standard intended to preserve the aesthetics or scenic beauty of the area."

The solar array will be visible from both I-91 and Technology Drive. In reference to the latter road, "this area has an industrial character and views will be most possible during times that deciduous vegetation is defoliated," board members wrote.

For the highway, "views will be limited to an approximate 1,000-foot stretch of interstate closest to the project and will be possible when traveling both northbound

and southbound," the board's order says.

"Views will be intermittent, broken by clumps of existing vegetation," officials added. "Visibility will be under 15 seconds when traveling this portion of the interstate."

The board also addresses glare concerns, saying that will not be an issue for I-91 drivers.

"To reduce any possibility of glare, all the solar panels will utilize an anti-reflective coating with less than 2 percent reflectivity, like those often required for use at solar fields adjacent to airports," PSB documents say.

— Erosion.

The state Agency of Agriculture had expressed concerns about topsoil at the project site, though developers have said they had not found evidence of high-quality agricultural soil there.

An order accompanying the certificate of public good says "topsoil disturbed during construction and stockpiled on site shall be seeded and mulched and stabilized" in accordance with state standards.

"The solar arrays will be installed to conform with the natural slope of the land with minimal ground alteration," board members added.

— Decommissioning.

Soil conservation also figures into the project's decommissioning.

"At the end of the useful life of the project, the project infrastructure will be removed, including the arrays, mounting poles, buildings, fence and concrete supports, and the site will be restored including the agricultural capability of the soils," the state's certificate says.

The certificate of public good calls for establishment of a decommissioning plan and fund. The costs of decommissioning the solar array were estimated at \$129,900 in 2013 dollars; that cost "will be adjusted annually to account for inflation using the Consumer Price Index."

— Construction.

While noting short-term noise impacts, the state's order says construction can take place only within certain hours — from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays. No construction could happen on Sundays or on federal or state holidays.

An anticipated construction schedule was not available Monday. But the Public Service Board's order says "construction of the project will begin once all (certificate of public good) conditions have been fulfilled and is anticipated to take approximately 90 days."

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