

5.01: Consider Request for a Zoning Amendment and Conditional Use Permit for the Installation of a Solar Garden at the Property Legally Described as Lot 3, Block 1, River Crossing Addition (Project No. 17-135); Case of Connexus Energy

City Planner Anderson presented the staff report. He stated that Connexus Energy has applied for a Zoning Amendment and a Conditional Use Permit to construct a new solar garden on the property legally described as Lot 3, Block 1, River Crossing Addition. He stated that the subject property is owned by Anoka County and would be leased by Connexus Energy. He stated that when the City contemplated solar energy systems several years ago, the Zoning Code was amended to consider ground or building mounted solar energy systems as permitted accessory use in any zoning district; however, it did not account for or address the possibility of a solar array being the principal use of a property, as would be the case with the Connexus proposal.

Brian Burandt stated that the proposed site would be 14 times the size of the existing solar array on the Connexus campus and would generate the power supply for 600 homes, noting that energy would remain in Ramsey. He stated that there are tax credits available for the solar system, battery system, and storage system which decrease the project costs. He explained that the midday solar peak and later peak of energy use, the storage system will allow that energy to be stored until the use is needed. He stated that Connexus approached municipalities to determine interest and there are three willing partners with land available through Anoka County, St. Francis, and the National Sports Center. He stated that this would be the largest multi-site community solar array in the midwest. He provided additional details on the proposed sites which would include fencing and pollinator habitat. He stated that they have learned key takeaways from the solar array on the Connexus campus.

Board Member Trossen asked the size of the battery and average lifespan.

Mr. Burandt provided additional details on the size and lifespan of the batteries. He explained how the batteries would be charged and store energy in order to disburse the energy during peak demand times.

Board Member Valentine asked for information on fire safety.

Mr. Burandt provided additional details on the batteries and noted that the batteries are safe and the price of batteries have actually been reduced because of the competition that has been brought to the market. He confirmed that there would be fire suppression as well.

Board Member Covart asked if the members would be offered a buy-in on the project.

Mr. Burandt explained that Connexus is leasing the land through municipalities and the energy will be used to lower the costs to all Connexus customers rather than offering a buy-in. He stated that there is not an issue with glare. He stated that after 25 years the equipment would be removed and the site would be restored for Anoka County to do what they wish with it.

City Planner Anderson stated that he spoke with the solar developer and was assured that the developer would create a decommissioning plan for the removal of the equipment and restoration of the land that would occur after that leased period expires.

Mr. Burandt stated that the storage developer has not yet been named but provided examples of storage containers that could be used in the solar array. He noted that the storage containers would be located on the back side of the swale if you were looking from Highway 10.

City Planner Anderson stated that staff does not have a final Site Plan as that would be contingent on final site work that is being done. He stated that part of the mapping process that was done in 2007 to prepare for the Comprehensive Plan update identified this land as Public/Quasi Public but the regrading of the land never occurred. He stated that currently the property is zoned as R-2/medium residential. He stated that staff believes that it would be appropriate to rezone the property as Public/Quasi-Public, especially because the County owns the property. He noted that substations are allowed in that zoning district and while a solar array is not a specified use, it would be similar. He stated that staff would recommend adding a text amendment to the zoning district to allow solar energy systems as a principal use with the issuance of a Conditional Use Permit. He noted that a Conditional Use Permit could then be used to allow the solar array. He stated that this would move forward to the Planning Commission for a public hearing at their September 5th meeting and would then move to the City Council.

Mr. Burandt stated that Connexus originally wanted to have a showcase on their property, as they have 18 acres of land but staff was hesitant and stated that they would support the solar array on another piece of property as they would rather see the land near the Connexus site preserved for a business park.

City Planner Anderson agreed that from an economic development perspective, Ramsey is short on industrial/business park land and therefore the remainder of the Connexus property would be desirable for that purpose. He stated that discussion has brought this idea to the County owned land, which would be a good marriage of the County owned land and the solar array.

Board Member Hiatt asked if there has been any feedback from the residents on Bowers Drive.

Mr. Burandt stated that they have not spoken with the residents in that area yet but would be open to holding a public meeting.

City Planner Anderson stated that if Connexus is interested, staff could open up City Hall earlier for an open house prior to the Planning Commission meeting for residents to ask more questions if desired.

Mr. Burandt stated that he has not heard any negative comments about creating more renewable energy.

Motion by Chairperson Stodola and seconded by Board Member Valentine to recommend approval of a Zoning Amendment to rezone the subject property to Public/Quasi Public and to add solar energy systems as a principal use with the issuance of a Conditional Use Permit.

Motion carried. Voting Yes: Chairperson Stodola, Board Member Valentine, Anderson, Covart, Hiatt, and Trossen. Voting No: None. Absent: Board Member Bernard.

Motion by Board Member Valentine and seconded by Board Member Hiatt to recommend approval of a Conditional Use Permit for the installation of a solar energy system on the subject property with contingencies.

Motion carried. Voting Yes: Chairperson Stodola, Board Member Valentine, Hiatt, Anderson, Covart, and Trossen. Voting No: None. Absent: Board Member Bernard.