

6.01: Consider Multiple Actions Related to a Request to Install and Maintain a Ground-Mounted Solar Energy System on the Property Legally Described as Lot 3, Block 1 River Crossing Addition (Project No. 17-135); Case of Connexus Energy.

- 1. Appeal for issuance of a Development Permit on an officially mapped parcel.**
- 2. Zoning Amendment to include Solar Energy Systems as a Principal Use with the issuance of a Conditional Use Permit in the Public/Quasi-Public District.**
- 3. Zoning Amendment to rezone a property from R-2 Residential to Public/Quasi Public.**
- 4. Conditional Use Permit to install and maintain a Solar Energy System.**

Motion by Commissioner VanScoy, seconded by Commissioner Anderson, to remove this item from the table.

Motion Carried. Voting Yes: Chairperson Bauer, Commissioners VanScoy, Anderson, Brauer, Gengler, Nosan, and Surma. Voting No: None. Absent: None.

Presentation

City Planner Anderson presented the Staff Report stating *this case was originally reviewed by the Planning Commission at their September 7, 2017 meeting. A Public Hearing was held (and closed) that evening; however, the Planning Commission tabled action so that the Economic Development Authority (EDA) had an opportunity to review and provide feedback specifically on the potential use of the Connexus Energy campus for the proposed solar farm installation.*

Assistant City Administrator/Economic Development Manager Brama reported *the EDA reviewed this case at their September 14, 2017 meeting. Note that their review was specific to the potential use of the outlot owned by Connexus Energy that is part of Connexus' corporate campus. The outlot is essentially rectangular in shape and is approximately 17.5 acres in size. The EDA unanimously supported reserving this land for future economic growth opportunities (commercial/industrial development) rather than for the solar farm being considered. The EDA did not provide any input or feedback on the Anoka County-owned site that is currently being considered for the solar farm. Their motion specifically recommended to City Council that the existing Connexus Energy outlot be reserved for future commercial/industrial use rather than for a solar farm. Staff reported the Environmental Policy Board recommended approval of the Zoning Amendments and Conditional Use Permit. City Staff also supports the recommended approvals as well as the appeal for the issuance of a development permit within an officially mapped area.*

Commission Business

Chairperson Bauer asked if this site were to not move forward if a solar farm would be located in another community.

Brian Burandt, Connexus Energy, explained the membership wanted more renewable energy within the cooperative. He explained three solar sites were being sought for Anoka County. He reported Connexus was pursuing Federal grant dollars for these solar farms that would sunset in 2019. He indicated the original vision was to place the solar farm on Connexus property.

Chairperson Bauer questioned if the solar farm energy would be used by Ramsey residents.

Mr. Burandt reported this was the case. He stated all energy gathered within a Ramsey solar farm would benefit and be used by Ramsey residents.

Commissioner VanScoy asked why Connexus decided to go elsewhere when they originally wanted to place the solar farm on their own property.

Mr. Burandt commented the City recommended looking at alternative locations as their outlot was a prime site for future commercial/industrial development and he was looking for a showcase parcel given the size and scale of this solar panel/solar collection project. He explained the Anoka County parcel would fit the needs of Connexus Energy.

Commissioner VanScoy inquired if the solar panels would create any glare.

Andrew Dallin, SoCore Energy, described the panels that would be used by Connexus Energy and noted they were covered with an anti-reflective coating meant to absorb as much sunlight as possible. He indicated there were several different technologies that used mirrors and this would not be used in Ramsey. He stated airports around the country were installing similar systems. He provided further comment on the initial glare study and the findings within this report.

Commissioner VanScoy expressed concern that the property surrounding the proposed solar farm was zoned R-2. He questioned how the solar farm would impact future development of the surrounding land.

Mr. Dallin reported the future homeowners would be going into their purchase with full knowledge of the solar farm. He reiterated that the glare study showed there would be no impacts on the surrounding properties, except from one receptor.

Commissioner VanScoy asked if Connexus would consider installing some sort of transitional space between the solar farm and the R-2 zoned properties.

Mr. Dallin deferred this question to Connexus Energy.

City Planner Anderson explained at the south side of the solar farm a double row of eight to ten-foot evergreen trees were in place along the property line. This would provide a buffer or transitional space. He stated it was his understanding the solar panels would not extend fully to the south property line.

Community Development Director Gladhill commented that additional plantings could be required, however staff believed the existing trees currently in place were adequate.

Mr. Burandt reported he could plant additional trees if required by the City.

Commissioner VanScoy explained he supported the solar farm concept, however, he wanted to be assured the solar farm was buffered from the surrounding properties.

Commissioner Brauer asked how Connexus would work to eliminate the potential glare that was discussed within the study that could occur three days out of the year.

Mr. Dallin stated any visual barrier (trees) would prevent the glare from occurring.

Commissioner Brauer questioned if trees could be planted around the solar farm or if this would hinder solar power collection.

Mr. Dallin explained how the trees would have to be planted around the solar farm in order to maximize solar power collection.

Commissioner Brauer supported the project having a natural prairie area surrounding the solar farm.

Mr. Burandt commented that all solar farms would have a pollinator friendly prairie area surrounding the project area.

Commissioner Gengler requested further information regarding the longevity of the solar panels and when potential development would occur in this area of the City.

Mr. Burandt reported the solar panels would have a life expectancy of 25 years. He explained Connexus would have a 20-year land lease with Anoka County with two five-year options.

Community Development Director Gladhill anticipated development would not occur in this portion of the City for another 10 to 15 years.

Rob Davis, Director of Center for Pollinators, reviewed a photograph with the Commission and commented on the proposed pollinator friendly solar garden.

Dave Nathe, 14453 Llama Street, explained he farmed vegetables in Ramsey. He explained he had his own bees to assist with his crops. He asked if anyone in Ramsey wanted to live adjacent to a solar farm. He believed that living next to a solar farm would not be most people's choice. He stated he did not want to have a solar farm located adjacent to his farm. He feared his property value would decrease if a solar farm were to locate adjunct to his property.

Jeff Pengra, 8390 Highway 10, expressed concern with how the value of his property would be impacted if a solar farm were to locate within the River Crossing Addition. He questioned what would happen to the equipment after 25 years.

Mr. Burandt explained after 25 years all of the equipment would be removed, recycled and the property would be returned to its original state.

Jeff Mobee, Shorewood RV, 8390 Highway 10, stated he liked the renewable component of this project and understood energy was an important thing. However, he suggested the solar farm be located on a Connexus property versus a parcel that wasn't zoned properly. He understood that Connexus had a shovel ready parcel available for a solar farm and recommended this be pursued.

Assistant City Administrator/Economic Development Manager Brama explained the EDA was proposing this parcel in order to keep the project within Ramsey.

Mr. Burandt commented Connexus Energy would like to pursue solar on another parcel, which was why the Anoka County site was proposed.

Mr. _____ questioned if the new solar farm would create new jobs.

Cara Bolton, Bolton Bees, explained the solar farm would create jobs for local beekeepers. She provided further comment on the importance of bees to the nation's agriculture. She believed the proposed prairie area was beautiful and would help farmers. She encouraged the Commissioner to offer their support for the proposed solar energy system.

Commissioner Brauer asked if the City would oppose another solar farm on the Connexus campus.

Community Development Director Gladhill explained this would be determined by the Planning Commission and the City Council.

Chairperson Bauer commented that it was City staff's idea to move the solar farm off the Connexus property and moved the project in a new direction.

Mr. Mobee encouraged the City to stick with its original plan for the solar farm and recommend it be installed on the Connexus property.

Colleen Hollanger, Prairie Restoration, discussed with the Commission how the prairie land would be installed and cared for by her employees.

Travis Bolton, Bolton Bees, stated he was a farmer and beekeeper. He described how bees were struggling throughout the country due to pesticides and poor habitat. He explained that newly installed solar farms were creating healthy bee habitats. He thanked Connexus Energy for the positive impact they were having on the environment.

Commissioner Gengler asked what the output would be from the proposed solar farm.

Mr. Burandt explained the annual output from the proposed solar farm could power 620 homes in Ramsey each year.

Further discussion ensued regarding the complexity of the request, along with the items that need to be approved by the Commission.

Motion by Commissioner VanScoy, seconded by Commissioner Gengler, to recommend that City Council adopt Ordinances #17-13 and #17-14 to rezone the Subject Property to Public/Quasi-Public and to amend Section 177-122 (Public/Quasi-Public) to identify solar energy systems as a principal use with the issuance of a Conditional Use Permit.

Further discussion

Commissioner Brauer expressed frustration with the way this item was brought to the City as it appeared to be a done deal. For this reason, he was not going to offer his support to the Ordinances.

Commissioner VanScoy withdrew his motion.

Community Development Director Gladhill asked if there was general consensus among the Commission regarding the request. By a show of hands three members supported the request, three members did not support the request, and one member was abstaining.

Chairperson Bauer questioned what would happen if the Planning Commission did not offer their support for the request.

Community Development Director Gladhill commented on the recommendations before the Planning Commission and explained if the rezoning was not approved by the Commission all other requests would be denied. He reported the item would still advance to the City Council, with a recommendation for denial. He explained Connexus could appeal the denial for the variance.

Commissioner Nosan stated she supported the solar farm, but had a hard time understanding why the solar farm was not being placed in an industrial area. She was bothered by the fact the solar farm was proposed for a residential area. For this reason, she did not know if she could support the request.

Commissioner Surma indicated he could not support the solar farm at the proposed location and believed the solar farm should be placed on Connexus property.

Motion by Commissioner Surma, seconded by Commissioner Brauer, to recommend that City Council deny Ordinances #17-13 and #17-14 to rezone the Subject Property to Public/Quasi-Public and to amend Section 177-122 (Public/Quasi-Public) to identify solar energy systems as a principal use with the issuance of a Conditional Use Permit.

Further discussion

Commissioner VanScoy stated he too struggled with this request. He wanted to see a solar farm in Ramsey, however, he did not believe it was proper to place this in the middle of a residential area. He explained this request became an issue when the request changed from being on Connexus property.

Commissioner Brauer commented the EDA was making policy for the Planning Commission, and this was the issue.

Commissioner VanScoy believed the most appropriate place for the solar farm was on Connexus property. He had concerns with what happened and how this request was handled by the City. While he did not want to support the solar farm in a residential area, he felt as if the Planning Commission had been backed into a corner. For this reason, he stated he could support the solar farm. He understood this was a good project for the community and the environment.

Commissioner Anderson agreed the Planning Commission had been backed into a corner, by no actions of their own. He explained he did not want the solar farm to go away. However, he too struggled with how the request was brought to the Commission.

Motion Carried. Voting Yes: Commissioners Surma, and Brauer. Voting No: Chairperson Bauer, Commissioners Anderson, Gengler, Nosan and VanScoy. Absent: None.

Motion by Commissioner VanScoy, seconded by Commissioner Gengler, to recommend that City Council approve Ordinances #17-13 and #17-14 to rezone the Subject Property to Public/Quasi-Public and to amend Section 177-122 (Public/Quasi-Public) to identify solar energy systems as a principal use with the issuance of a Conditional Use Permit.

Motion Carried. Voting Yes: Chairperson Bauer, Commissioners VanScoy, Gengler, Anderson, and Nosan. Voting No: Brauer and Surma. Absent: None.

Motion by Commissioner VanScoy, seconded by Commissioner Gengler, to recommend that City Council adopt Resolution #17-09-211 approving an appeal for issuance of a development permit for the Subject Property for the installation of a solar energy system.

Motion Carried. Voting Yes: Chairperson Bauer, Commissioners VanScoy, Gengler, Anderson, and Nosan. Voting No: Brauer and Surma. Absent: None.

Motion by Commissioner VanScoy, seconded by Commissioner Gengler, to recommend that City Council adopt Resolution #17-09-212 granting a Conditional Use Permit for the installation and maintenance of solar energy system on the Subject Property contingent to review and approval as to legal form by the City Attorney.

Motion Carried. Voting Yes: Chairperson Bauer, Commissioners VanScoy, Gengler, Anderson, and Nosan. Voting No: Brauer and Surma. Absent: None.