

**5.02: Public Hearing: 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.**

**Public Hearing**

Chairperson Bauer called the public hearing to order at 7:08 p.m.

**Presentation**

Community Development Director Gladhill presented the staff report stating 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 (the "Subject Property"). The system would have the capability of producing 3.5 megawatts (MW) with ground mounted solar photovoltaic panels and would include 6 MW of battery energy storage. This is one of three (3) sites within Anoka County that Connexus Energy is developing to produce solar energy.

Community Development Director Gladhill reported the Subject Property is owned by Anoka County and would be leased by Connexus Energy. 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 a permitted accessory use in any zoning district. However, it did not account for, or address, the possibility of a solar energy system being the principal use of a property, as would be the case with Connexus' proposal.

Community Development Director Gladhill explained both the current zoning standards for solar energy systems and the information submitted by Connexus are attached for reference. The final design plans are in the process of being prepared by the solar developer (based on site work being conducted now) but are not complete at this time. They have stated that they do not anticipate any major changes from the initial proposed layout and the Site Plan would still be subject to review and approval by the City. Staff stated 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.

**Citizen Input**

Chairperson Bauer asked if the City had any zoning districts where solar energy systems were addressed.

Community Development Director Gladhill explained this was addressed within the City's employment districts. He did not anticipate the City would see another request of this size in a residential district.

Commissioner VanScoy questioned what the zoning was for the surrounding property.

Community Development Director Gladhill indicated the long-term goal of the City was to have the surrounding property be zoned R-2 Residential. He provided further comment on the City's Zoning Map.

Commissioner Anderson inquired if the City had any idea when the surrounding parcels will develop.

Community Development Director Gladhill explained one owner was considering development and the other had no plans. He anticipated that these parcels could not develop for another 10 to 20 years. He discussed how utilities were lacking in this area of the City.

Commissioner Nosan asked if there was any other solar farm in Minnesota located in a residential area.

Community Development Director Gladhill stated there were a variety of solar farms located in the State of Minnesota. He encouraged Connexus Energy to speak to this, but he reiterated that the requested solar farm would be installed prior to any residential housing.

Mike Bash, Connexus Energy Vice President and CFO, introduced himself to the Commission. He stated Connexus Energy was owned by its members and these members were looking for greener energy options. With solar energy expenses on the decline, Connexus was considering more renewable energy projects. He commented on other sites that were being considered for a solar farm, one being in Blaine and the other in St. Francis. He provided further information on his discussions with Anoka County on the proposed renewable energy project. He noted the solar farm would generate enough energy for 605 homes and estimated the solar farm would be in place for 25 years. He reported the solar farm would be planted with pollinator friendly plants. He discussed the location of other solar farms in the metro area.

Commissioner Anderson commented he was concerned about the glare coming from the solar farm.

Mr. Bash spoke to the small amount of glare that would be emitted by the solar panels. He explained numerous solar panels were located at airports and this was not a safety concern for arriving airplanes. He stated he has not noticed a glare coming from the existing solar farm in the past three years. He described how the solar farm would be landscaped to assist with reducing any glare issues.

Commissioner Anderson questioned if there have been any reports of scorched landscape or plants that were adjacent to solar farms.

Mr. Bash stated he was not aware of any instances in the entire country.

Commissioner VanScoy asked how many other sites Connexus has considered for the proposed solar farm.

Mr. Bash commented Connexus had considered a total of three other sites.

Commissioner Gengler inquired if the solar power projections were for a day, week, month or year.

Mr. Bash stated the projections were for a year.

Commissioner Surma asked if energy rates will begin to decline if more renewable energy sources are pursued.

Mr. Bash explained the cheapest energy source was wind. He commented on how the storage of solar energy would assist in slightly lowering overall energy prices.

Jan Groth, 15240 Kangaroo Street, commented on how crops were being affected by climate change.

Chairperson Bauer explained that climate change and solar farms were two totally different issues.

Jeff Nobbe, 8390 Highway 10, questioned why the City was considering changing the zoning of land for a 25-year time period. He believed this was taking away from potential future development and would change the landscape of the community. He did not anticipate the visitors on the bike trail would enjoy viewing the solar farm. He also feared how his property value would be adversely impacted by the proposed solar farm.

Jeff Pengro, 8390 Highway 10, asked if it was a tax benefit to have another solar farm in the City.

Community Development Director Gladhill commented on the tax rate for the 19-acre project site and noted Connexus Energy does pay property taxes.

Mr. Pengro believed the City would benefit more by placing homes in this area of the community than another solar farm.

Further discussion ensued regarding property values and tax rates.

Mr. Nobbe encouraged Connexus Energy to purchase their own parcel for the proposed solar farm as he did not want the value of his business to be reduced.

Dave Nathe, 14453 Llama Street, stated he has been farming this ground since 1971. He discussed the changes he has seen in the City over the years and noted the County purchased this land in two separate parcels for a river crossing. He believed that property values would be reduced as

residential home buyers would not want to live adjacent to a solar farm. He feared that he would not be able to subdivide or develop his land. He encouraged Connexus Energy to pursue another location and for the Commission to not offer their support for the solar energy system.

Al Pearson, 14821 Bowers Drive, stated he had the same concerns as the others that have spoken against the solar farm. He questioned how much grading would occur on the site and stated he did not believe the solar farm would be a good fit. He explained he did not support tying up this property when opportunities for development could occur. He commented on the City's tax base and encouraged the City to consider the benefits of development versus a solar farm.

Mr. Bash commented on the personal property taxes that were paid by Connexus Energy. He explained no grading would occur on the site.

Community Development Director Gladhill stated this item could be brought back if the Commission has concerns with the economic development of this area.

Motion by Commissioner VanScoy, seconded by Commissioner Surma, to close the public hearing.

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

Chairperson Bauer closed the public hearing closed at 8:14 p.m.

### **Commission Business**

Commissioner Surma stated he would like to see the proposed solar farm placed on the Connexus Energy property along Sunwood Drive.

Commissioner Anderson questioned the size of this lot.

Community Development Director Gladhill reported the Connexus Energy lot was 17.5 acres in size.

Commissioner Nosan understood that solar energy was important. She explained she did have concerns about placing a solar farm in an area completely surrounded by residentially zoned parcels. She thanked the neighbors for voicing their concerns. She believed the Commission needed additional information on this request prior to moving forward and stated she would like to hear from the EDA.

Community Development Director Gladhill stated it may make sense to step back and work through the request in further detail, noting the Commission could postpone action on the solar farm to October.

Chairperson Bauer believed this was a reasonable course of action. He asked if postponement of the item would complicate matters for Connexus Energy.

Mr. Bash stated he would rather see the item postponed than denied. He explained he appreciated the questions that were being raised by the Commission and stated he could assist in researching answers with staff.

Motion by Commissioner Nosan, seconded by Commissioner VanScoy, to table action on the Connexus Energy solar farm to the October 12, 2017 Planning Commission meeting.

**Further discussion**

Commissioner VanScoy stated he fully supported solar power in Ramsey but indicated he was looking forward to hearing further from the EDA on this matter.

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