

Environmental Board Comments on Zoning Update

Renewable Energy

The Environmental Board (EB) recommends that the new zoning regulations specifically allow renewable energy to the greatest reasonable extent. This includes wind, rooftop and ground-mount solar, battery storage, and geothermal. As a general principle, the zoning rules should recognize that renewable energy is attempting to address a very serious worldwide climate problem, and that relatively minor impacts of renewable energy installations should be kept in perspective. The zoning code should have no restrictions whatsoever on rooftop solar. Geothermal should be widely allowed with possible regulations when neighboring property or woodlands or other sensitive habitats could potentially be negatively impacted by the installation of the geothermal system. The EB suggests regulations be put in place for ground-mount solar and wind power generating systems. Here are some recommendations from the EB:

1. Ground-mount solar should be allowed as long as it is not unreasonably obtrusive. While it may not be reasonable to cover the front lawn of a ½-acre residential neighborhood lot with solar panels, backyard installations or other installations with buffering and/or reasonable setbacks should be acceptable. The installation should not have to be completely shielded from public view. There is already an existing ground-mount solar installation visible from Jefferson Road in the village, which does not have pose a significant adverse impact to the surrounding neighborhood.
2. Farmers should be allowed to install solar panels on their land, in areas not protected by conservation easements, even if they are visible by the public. Preference should be given to land not being used for agriculture. However, the use of agricultural land for renewable energy systems should be allowed. Trees should not be cleared for solar installations. Interest in utility-scale installations is unlikely in Pittsford, but if such a proposal were put forward, zoning regulations should lay out parameters for protecting agricultural land and valuable habitat. It is common to allow some crops and pasture use around the bases of solar panels.
3. It is unlikely that Pittsford has adequate wind resources and topography to attract a utility-scale wind farm. However, it is possible that individual farmers may be interested in installing a wind turbine or two on their land, and the EB recommends that this be allowed (again, on land not protected by conservation easements). Zoning can regulate such things as the height, setback, decibel level at the property line of non-participating landowners, and wildlife (e.g., birds and bats) protection. It should be remembered that allowing a farmer to install a wind turbine may help to make the farm more economically viable, thereby protecting agricultural land. The visual impact of an operating wind farm is subjective to the public: while some people complain about wind turbines disturbing viewsheds, other people find them attractive, and acceptance is likely to grow over time as familiarity increases.
4. Micro-wind (small residential or commercial, roof- ground-mounted turbines) is unlikely to be widely attractive in Pittsford given that the Town does not have high wind levels to begin with and that the shelter produced by developed areas reduces the wind strength even further.

However, if certain residents want to experiment with wind power, the EB recommends that this be allowed, subject to noise and possible size and height limitations.

The EB recommends that battery storage be allowed. Companies such as Tesla are currently making batteries that can be mounted on the wall of a garage to store power. This could make solar installations more useful and attractive. This is not really any different from having an electric vehicle with a large battery in the garage, and this has become much more common without creating problems. Larger, external battery storage, which may be desirable at a commercial location, should also be allowed. Any safety concerns would be dealt with by NYS code.

Sustainable Building Practices

The EB recommends that the Town update the incentive zoning policies to specifically encourage green building practices. These would include things such as

- Solar installations
- Geothermal installation
- LED lighting
- Use of electric, instead of gas, appliances
- LEED certification
- Passive home construction
- Use of alternative, sustainable materials and building techniques
- Green roofs
- Permeable pavement
- Dark Sky Standards
- Reuse of commercial properties or brownfield sites in order to preserve agricultural or undeveloped lands and to discourage sprawl.

The Town should consider requiring practices such as these to the extent that is legal and reasonable. For example, the Town may consider requiring a certain level of LEED certification for certain commercial buildings or require that commercial buildings of a certain size include a solar installation. Permeable pavement could be required in certain cases, and lighting reduction could also be required, such as prohibiting illuminated decorative subdivision entrances.

One item that zoning should require is the installation of EV charging stations at apartments or multi-family buildings. This would enable residents who don't own their own garage to have an electric vehicle.

Habitat Protection

The EB recommends that the Town consider adding zoning regulations to protect woodlands and other important and sensitive habitat. A prohibition against clearing a certain number or acreage of trees

without a permit should be considered. In addition, the zoning code should encourage or require that at least 50%-75% of proposed landscape plantings use native plant species.

Although a separate issue from zoning, the EB would be in favor of the Town purchasing the development rights for additional parcels that were identified as part of the Greenprint.

Meeting the “Spirit” of Zoning

The EB recommends that RRSP zoning be updated to require developers to more closely match the spirit of the zoning rules. The Young Matthews property is an example of where a development may have met the letter of the zoning rules, but in the opinion of the EB, it did not meet the spirit. The conceptual diagram in the comprehensive plan used to illustrate this zoning was coincidentally the Young Matthews property itself, and the example illustration has a very unique feel, whereas what was actually approved feels more or less like a standard subdivision. In particular, houses were supposed to be more tightly clustered, leaving large tracts of open land that could be suitable for farming, recreation, or wildlife habitat. However, the open space in the approved plan, while meeting the minimum requirements, is fragmented, which greatly reduces its utility for the above uses. The above uses should be prioritized over creating open space that simply benefits the homeowner. The EB recommends either adopting stricter language for the RRSP zoning, or moving to form-based zoning, if that would help preserve the zoning’s intent when put into practice.

The EB in general, recommends that “connectivity” be implemented in the zoning code as much as possible. This includes ensuring that open space is connected and contiguous, that trails are connected to each other, and that wildlife corridors exist which connect larger contiguous tracts of habitat. When these sorts of things are fragmented, their utility is greatly diminished.

A more radical path would be to update the RRSP zoning to require or encourage development where sustainability is at the very core of the design. For example, Ithaca’s EcoVillage has sustainably designed homes in a neighborhood that is designed for biking instead of cars and has shared spaces for recreation, eating, and gardening.

Active Transportation

The EB recommends that zoning strongly encourage or require multi-use trail connections throughout the Town. Designing a multi-use trail network in such a way that residents can, to the greatest extent possible, get to parks, schools, the village, and shopping by walking or biking on dedicated trails and paths would be highly desirable. Multi-use trails that can accommodate both pedestrians and bikes are preferred. Again, connectivity is key. Areas around Calkins Road, Thornell Road, Mendon Center, and Mendon Road, as well as completing the Auburn Trail were areas of interest mentioned by specific EB members. The Railroad Loop trail that runs behind the businesses on the northeast side of Monroe Avenue would benefit from beautification, and businesses should be encouraged or required to provide buffering and beautification measures along this trail.

The Monroe Avenue commercial corridor is an area that has been identified for redesign. The EB encourages the Town to think boldly and creatively in this area. If active transportation is truly to be encouraged in this area, then bike lanes should be physically separated from traffic. Lanes which are simply painted on the road do not provide much comfort for cyclists in an area with such intense traffic. Physically separated lanes could be established by replacing the grassy area between the sidewalk and the road with a bike lane. In order to make this an area that is attractive for both cycling and walking, businesses should be moved closer to the street, and shop windows and outdoor dining should be encouraged. The Town may want to hire urban planners to create a bold vision and long-term implementation plan.