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Senate and House Natural Resources and Energy Committees March 19, 2015
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Sent via member Katie Pickens, kpickens@leg.state.vt.us, and Christopher Bray, cbray@sover.net.

Dear Senate and House Natural Resources and Energy Committees:

Thank you for seeking input on the issue of siting solar farms in Vermont. I am Chairman of the Weybridge Planning Commission and sit on the boards of VHCB and VNRC. From what I've learned in these three capacities and from watching New Haven's travails with an onslaught of solar farms, the Vermont Gas pipeline debacle and the Lowell wind tower acrimony, I believe the PSB regulatory structure for reviewing solar farms (and other renewable energy projects) is seriously flawed.

The PSB regulations and process do not allow for enough input and influence from local towns and adjoining property owners. I understand from a policy perspective why towns are prevented from prohibiting these facilities through zoning since they serve a larger good. So I'm not suggesting veto power; instead I am suggesting a regulatory structure and process that gives towns, adjoiners and regions a stronger and more meaningful voice in siting decisions.

The visual impact of solar farms can be quite dramatic. The visual character of our landscape is a public good that doesn't need to be compromised by this other public good. Our visual landscape is not only important to tourism but to our own quality of life. Rarely are these solar farms required to change sitings or screen the panels...this is lack of sensitivity and mitigation is so un-Vermont.

As we are quickly learning, including in the town of New Haven, there are good ways and not so good ways to site a solar farm. As we have seen in many different regulatory processes, there are good ways to engage towns and neighbors and some not so good ways. From my perspective, the current state of reviewing and permitting solar farm proposals falls into the "not good" category.

Governor Shumlin's Wind Tower Siting Commission issued a report two or so years ago making many excellent suggestions for PSB regulatory change related to wind power. I believe many of the recommendations have equal application to solar farms. The regulatory structure needs to be reformed quickly and I urge you to move as expeditiously as possible as it seems like a new solar farm is popping up every other week in Addison County!

Thank you for listening.


William Roper