



CITY OF CONCORD

New Hampshire's Main Street™
Conservation Commission

February 20, 2019

City of Concord Planning Board
c/o Concord Planning Department
41 Green Street
Concord, NH 03301

Re: Comments on Proposed Solar Ordinance

Dear Planning Board Members,

The Concord Conservation Commission supports the City's efforts to promote renewable energy sources and climate change initiatives. We applaud the effort being put forth by the members of the Concord Energy and Environment Advisory Committee in working towards implementation of a Strategic Plan that will shape the long-term goals and outline the action steps of this endeavor. We also commend the City staff, including the Planning Division and Engineering Division, for their efforts to develop the proposed updates to the City's Zoning Ordinance and Site Plan Regulations, which will regulate the future solar energy sources proposed in our City.

We recognize that solar energy has an important role to play as we collectively work towards increasing renewable energy sources worldwide. Solar is already cost competitive with fossil fuel energy on certain scales and will become more so as its technology advances. Both promoting and regulating solar energy sources are important aspects of Concord's future and must be done with an appropriate balance to ensuring we protect our resources and quality of life while also promoting a renewable energy future. For our part, the Conservation Commission is charged with protecting, promoting and developing Concord's natural assets. We are guided by our master plan and our open space plan each of which were developed with comprehensive and extensive public input from Concord citizens. Therefore, we are concerned with striking the right balance between promoting renewable energy sources and protecting the valuable natural resources of the City.

The Commission has monitored and reviewed the development of the proposed Solar Ordinance and we have provided previous comments directly to the Planning Division during the drafting phase. In general, we support the draft Ordinance as currently written. Our primary concern is

to ensure that we end up with a proper balance when implementing future solar uses within the rural and open space areas of the City. Predominantly, these rural and open space areas of Concord are located within the Open Space Residential (RO District). Therefore, we feel that any proposed changes to the current Zoning Ordinance should carefully take into consideration the potential impacts of future development, within the RO District specifically, and should carefully reflect the vision of the City's Master Plan.

The Vision for Concord, as stated in the Master Plan 2030, is as follows: *"Concord maintains its essential character that is valued by its residents while accommodating growth and development in a way that maintains and is consistent with that essential character."* As further stated in the Master Plan, the essential character of Concord includes *"an extensive rural landscape including preserved open space, active agricultural lands, and working forests."*

While we recognize that the inclusion of solar farms in the RO District may be necessary in order to promote an effective renewable energy policy and to work towards a global reduction in fossil fuel consumption, it is imperative that we do so in a manner that will continue to preserve the rural character of the District that is valued both by its current residents and by the City as a whole. We fully support the initiatives for promoting residential and community solar in these rural and open space areas. Commercial solar projects, on the other hand, have the potential to significantly alter the rural aesthetic and quality of the City's rural areas and to jeopardize the natural resources within our open space areas. It is critical to recognize these potential impacts and to impose reasonable limitations on the size of commercial solar projects in the RO District.

Large scale commercial solar farms will most certainly alter the essential character of the rural areas of the City if they become too expansive or are located in highly viewable areas. Many residents of the RO District are unaware of these proposed changes to the Zoning Ordinance which could have significant implications to them and to how they value the character of the open space that surrounds them. This was evidenced last year by the local opposition to a proposed commercial solar farm on West Portsmouth Street that we understand was deemed to be too expansive by the neighborhood residents and inconsistent with the rural character of the neighborhood. Limiting the overall size of a solar farm and providing adequate buffers from adjacent land uses are two ways to mitigate the effects that these facilities will have on the character of the RO District. Site specific concerns should also be taken into consideration. Where possible, promoting solar farms that are set back from roadways or viewpoints would also lessen the impact that they have on the essential character of the open space areas.

There are many environmental factors that should also be taken into consideration when siting solar farms in open space areas. While many of these factors can be properly addressed through appropriate design and construction, like water quality concerns, others could simply be affected by the size of such a facility. Wildlife corridors exist throughout the City's open space areas as well as migratory routes. Large scale land coverage of a single solar farm could have an impact on wildlife travelling through the landscape. Large scale land coverage of multiple solar farms in the RO District could have significant impacts. Therefore, it is important to ensure that portions of all parcels remain in a permanent open space condition.

Aside from agricultural uses, the current RO District essentially only allows residential cluster developments. For all practical purposes, the potential development opportunities in the RO District include only single-family housing developments. And the Zoning Ordinance has

specific requirements and limitations for these types of developments. In the RO District the Ordinance requires that 60% of the overall parcel be preserved in open space condition and that only 40% of the parcel be utilized for development. It also requires that an open space buffer of not less than 100-feet in width be preserved around the perimeter of the development. These requirements highlight and reinforce the City's recognition of the importance for maintaining and preserving significant areas of open spaces within the RO District.

The draft Solar Ordinance includes a new defined term "Solar Land Coverage" which is effectively the overall developed area of a proposed solar farm or solar collection system. The draft Ordinance proposes a maximum of 40% solar land coverage in the RO District for commercial solar uses, which would include large scale solar farms. This would ensure that 60% of the overall parcel remains in an open space condition which is consistent with the established requirements for cluster developments and the established principles for preservation of critical open space areas in the RO District. While the Conservation Commission supports this proposed aspect of the draft Ordinance, we would not support any increase in the allowable solar land coverage above 40% without further study and analysis being provided.

The draft Ordinance also includes setback requirements from property lines for proposed solar collection systems. In the RO District this setback is proposed to be 50-feet, whereas the perimeter buffer requirement for a cluster development is 100-feet. In many cases, a 50-foot setback (buffer) will not be adequate to ensure preservation of the existing character of a neighborhood or rural area, especially from existing homes that may be directly adjacent to the solar collection system. The Conservation Commission recommends that the minimum buffer width be increased to 100-feet in the RO District, which again will be consistent with the previously established regulations for these rural and open space areas of our City.

In summary, we simply recommend that the new solar ordinance respect the established parameters for development within the RO District and that it apply the same requirements for open space and perimeter buffer preservation that are already contained within the existing Zoning Ordinance.

Again, we appreciate all of the efforts that are going into this process and we feel that it is headed in the right direction. We also appreciate the opportunity to participate in this important dialogue.

Sincerely,



Kristine S. Tardiff, Chair
Concord Conservation Commission