# Vernon Township Environmental Commission

**June 20, 2022 General Meeting Minutes**

Municipal Building, 7 PM

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM by Chair Diane Wexler.

Diane read the Statement of Compliance. She then led the Commissioners in the pledge of allegiance and salute to the flag.

Roll call was taken for attendance – present were:

* + DIANE WEXLER, Chair
  + CATHERINA SAWOSZCZYK
  + CRAIG WILLIAMS, Vice Chair, Liaison to Land Use Board
  + MARGARET DISTASI

Absent was BONNIE TADRICK.

**GENERAL MEETING:**

**Approval of Minutes, May 19, 2022 Meeting**

Craig Williams made a motion to approve the minutes as presented. Catherina Sawoszczyk seconded the motion. The minutes were then approved by unanimous vote.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SESSION (Agenda Items Only)**

Diane Wexler opened the meeting to public comments. No members of the public were present or came forward to speak, so Diane immediately closed this portion of the meeting.

**LAND USE BOARD – LIAISON REPORT**

Land Use Board Liaison Craig Williams reported that a long-planned project to build an apartment complex on Theta Drive looks as if it will finally go through. He said that the developers, Theta 456 Associates, LLC, had received an extension of time on their application because they had been unable to secure a commitment from Suez Water that enough water would be available for construction. According to Craig, Theta 456 Associates just received a letter from Suez Water getting the necessary assurances, so the project should be underway in fairly short order, after securing a few additional permits and approvals from the county. Peg Distasi asked if there was a start date for construction yet; Craig replied that there wasn’t an exact date specified but it should begin soon. He also mentioned, as an aside, that Suez Water has been sold and will now be called something else.

Craig next reported that the Land Use Board had also reviewed Ordinance Revision #22-11, which seeks to update the township’s regulations on legal cannabis, upon request of the Town Council. According to Craig, the Town Council wants to permit an unlimited number of cannabis-related enterprises to operate within the township, and seeks to allow marijuana cultivation well within the town’s McAfee Mixed Use Zone, as well as in specific residentially-zoned areas. The Land Use Board advised that these changes would violate the town’s master plan and sent a letter back to the Town Council indicating their disapproval. Craig also noted that there may be some environmental and financial concerns with certain related projects—specifically, that the water and electricity requirements may tax or exceed town capabilities—that need to be fully considered and resolved. Peg Distasi suggested that all five members of the Environmental Commission be present when these projects come up on the Land Use Board docket, as there needs to be as strong a presence as possible to represent associated environmental issues and concerns.

**APPLICATIONS UNDER REVIEW –** There were no applications under review for discussion at this time.

**OLD BUSINESS**

**Pollinator Garden:** Diane Wexler reported that the first pollinator garden project is successfully underway, then shifted her attention to the second possible pollinator garden location, an open plot at Veterans Memorial Park under consideration for development next year. She said that the township will allow the installation of a second pollinator garden there, but the bed she located contains a lot of white stone, concrete, and broken equipment—all of which will need to be cleared out, requiring a tremendous amount of work. Peg Distasi noted there are some large established trees nearby that could also prove problematic, but Diane advised that those trees are actually outside the garden area. Peg suggested that they start this fall, asking the Boy Scouts to help them clean out the area from September to November, and then request help from the Girl Scouts with planting next Spring. Diane mentioned that a Vernon high school teacher she knows has offered to recruit students from the Key Club and other school-based community service organizations for them next year, so these may be some worthwhile connections they can draw upon for assistance as well.

**Solar Panels:** Craig Williams began by stating thathe recently attended a YSG Solar board meeting via Zoom, and the news coming out of that meeting was not particularly good. He said that a number of township sites he suggested for potential community solar zones were rejected because they were either inadequate in size or because they had DEP-related issues with buffers and watersheds. Craig also mentioned the YSG was not at this point willing to incur the expense of carport framing at parking lots. He stated that the only proposed site that YSG deemed particularly suitable for solar panel installations is the Baldwin property, which is currently being reserved for recreational use. He added that the suggested Veterans Memorial Park location was unacceptable to YSG because of its current use as a Medivac landing site.

Craig said that he also broached the subject of a second but similar option that was previously discussed—solar installations used by individuals to reduce their individual electrical costs. YSG responded by stating there would be an issue with providing money up front, since they would be unable to avail themselves of the various grants that support their leasing program. They also informed Craig that JCP&L has very strict rules about how much solar capacity they can carry on their distribution lines, and for safety reasons will not accept anything in their distribution area that would bring solar up to over 40% of carrying capacity. Craig said he found this assertion a bit difficult to believe. Peg Distasi proposed that he send the Board of Public Utilities (BPU) a letter inquiring about the safety buffers that are required; Diane Wexler suggested that he ask the BPU for a list of preferred or recommended solar vendors that might be able to accommodate them, as well as getting direct input from JCP&L. Craig mentioned that he was also thinking of contacting Sussex Rural Electric Cooperative for their safety buffer information.

Craig then remarked that he also brought up the topic of charging stations at the meeting with YSG. The YSG representative said that the rules for charging stations were being revised as they spoke, but they should be finalized by October, and once they are, he would be happy to revisit the possibility of an agreement to do charging station installations. Diane Wexler reminded the commissioners in attendance that they can’t wait until October; they need to start looking for grants at the present time. Catherina Sawoszczyk brought up a solar infrastructure grant program that Governor Murphy recently announced; Diane said that she already forwarded the information about this program to the mayor’s office, which in turn encouraged the commissioners to seek these funds and promised to provide them with whatever assistance they need to make this happen.

Peg Distasi suggested that they approach YSG Solar with a proposal for the Baldwin Property, asking how much of the required acreage would be needed and if they would consider putting up solar canopies in the parking area. Catherina Sawoszczyk reminded everybody in attendance that YSG is not necessarily interested in building these kinds of installations due to their expense; Craig Williams concurred, and cautioned that if the JCP&L solar carrying capacity numbers are correct, such a project will not be feasible anyway. Peg then inquired as to whether or not Craig mentioned solar canopies for the municipal center parking lot when he met with YSG Solar; Craig replied yes, stating YSG prefers not to do this kind of work, but advised that they are not the only game in town. Peg then remarked that there are only four municipal-sized solar installations for 75 square acres in Vernon, an unfortunate state of affairs. Craig responded by saying that Vernon Township does not control all of that land. Peg countered, saying that she includes in that equation the many businesses and commercial enterprises in town that do not avail themselves of larger-scale solar energy technologies.

**Septic Service Metered Disposal:** Craig Williams reported that he had drafted a letter designed to gauge community interest in a potential septic service metered disposal plan, but thought they perhaps want to ascertain who would be administering the program before actively seeking a customer base. He wondered if the Vernon MUA would be the logical candidate. Craig Williams noted that there is nothing to administer until a holding tank is in place. Diane Wexler countered that having a database full of potential customers could also spark action.

Peg Distasi mentioned that work on Transfer Station #4 was recently authorized and approved; Craig Williams suggested that they might be able to establish a metered discharge port rather than a dedicated holding tank in that case, which would be ideal. Diane cautioned that work on this transfer station may not be completed for some time, so it might be good to secure the cooperation of the septic service providers now—getting them to offer discounts for regular servicing on a neighborhood or community basis, and putting the program in place so that it is ready and waiting when Transfer Station #4 is complete. Peg Distasi expressed her belief that they should first try to put an ordinance in place to mandate regular septic pumping. Diane questioned whether or not you can force people to do something like this; Craig replied that such a mandate can be accomplished under town occupancy rules. Peg said that they should highlight their valid environmental concerns over septic-related lake, stream, and aquifer pollution as justification for this kind of measure. The commissioners then agreed to write a proposal for a septic servicing ordinance and direct it to the town council for their consideration. Craig offered the language that he already drafted for the letter he mentioned earlier as the basis for the proposal.

**Spotted Lanternfly**: Diane Wexler began by advising that she is in the process of trying to secure an expert to speak to them and answer their questions about the spotted lanternfly infestation. Craig Williams asked if Diane had submitted informational or educational materials for inclusion on the township website. Diane replied that Charles Voelker, the township’s business administrator, already agreed to place the information on the website, but so far she was unable to locate the materials online. Peg remarked that she couldn’t find the information on the website either, so Diane promised to call Mr. Voelker’s office the next day to follow up.

**NEW BUSINESS**

Peg Distasi inquired as to whether or not the commissioners should take up the issue of some unacceptably low wires on Route 515. Craig Williams replied that normally this would not be a concern for the Environmental Commission, but noted that these wires are dangerously close to the woods. Diane Wexler concurred, arguing that a forest fire could be ignited if the wires came down. Peg mentioned that the wires are right near the “Welcome To Vernon” sign on 515 at the Vernon/Hardyston border. Craig said he would go check out the area to determine the precise location of the wires in question—helping him ascertain which municipality is responsible for their maintenance. Diane asked Craig to let her know what he finds out; she then offered to make the necessary calls if they fall under Vernon’s jurisdiction. Peg agreed to follow up with town officials as well.

Diane Wexler referenced an email that Bonnie Tadrick sent around earlier, citing a construction site violation of soil stabilization fencing requirements that the town received on June 9. She said that this incident is not the first time the township has fallen short in maintaining proper oversight of construction zones. Diane then voiced her grave concern about the possibility of soil erosion and mudslides—particularly during the heavy rains that often occur in the spring and fall—and stressed that the town needs to do their due diligence at construction sites when these events occur. Craig Williams concurred, stating that these construction projects are supposed to have adequate supervision from the town. Diane then inquired as to who is in charge of construction zone oversight in the township; Craig suggested that they contact the town business administrator for that information. Diane then offered to follow-up with Mr. Voelker.

Peg Distasi announced that the town council just approved a resolution authorizing the Land Use Board to undertake a study of a property on Route 94 that was once found to have significant flooding, groundwater, and contamination problems. Craig Williams said that he had seen this study on the agenda for an upcoming Land Use Board meeting. Peg proposed that the commissioners carefully follow and track this issue—placing it on Environmental Commission meeting agendas going forward—until the Land Use Board issues findings as to whether or not the property is environmentally sound and appropriate for redevelopment. Catherina Sawoszczyk wondered if this study could have something to do with a proposed housing development in the area. Peg confirmed that Ryan Homes made a presentation to the town council a few meetings back, with the intention to build a mixed-community 200-unit complex near the property in question. Craig then proceeded to clarify that the resolution actually has more to do with eminent domain and confiscation issues more than environmental concerns.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION—ANY VERNON ENVIRONMENTAL ITEM**

No members of the public were present or came forward to speak.

**COMMISSIONER COMMENTS**

Peg Distasi mentioned that she would like the Environmental Commission to present an award at the next Town Council meeting to the Vernon High School Green Team for planting 100 trees in the township—and to write a letter recognizing Vernon resident Elmer Platz for winning the 2021 Tree Farmer of the Year Award from the New Jersey Tree Farm Program, as well as acknowledging him for his many contributions to environmental stewardship in the township. Peg then called for a vote to proceed with these commendations. The commissioners unanimously voted to approve both efforts.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Craig Williams reminded the other commissioners that the next meeting will be held on July 18, 2022. He then made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Catherina Sawoszczyk seconded the motion. The Commissioners then agreed to adjourn the meeting via unanimous consent. The meeting was adjourned at 8:08 PM.

**Respectfully submitted by Leslie Boen, Recording Secretary.**