Virginia Solar Energy Development and Energy Storage Authority Meeting

**Minutes**

**April 28, 2023**

**10:00 AM – 12:00 PM**

**Twin Hickory Public Library**

**Call to Order**

Authority Chair Cliona Robb called the meeting to order at approximately 10:10 AM and then moved on to member and guest introductions. It should be noted that several members arrived late because of traffic delays caused by bad weather and were asked to introduce themselves upon their arrival.

**Members Present:** Cliona Robb, Paul Duncan, Rumy Mohta, Michael Walsh, Jo Anne Webb, Skyler Zunk, Gregory Habeeb, Colleen Lueken, Katharine Bond, Michael Herbert, Chase Counts,

**Members joining remotely:** Jon Hillis

**Members Absent:** Harry Godfrey, John Ockerman, Angela King

**Virginia Energy Staff Present:**

Virginia Energy: Director Glenn Davis, Ken Jurman, Aaron Berryhill, Carrie Hearne

**Governor’s Office:**

Deputy Secretary Chelsea Jenkins

**Local Permitting Challenges**

**Presenters**: *Francis Hodsoll, CEO, SolUnesco; Drew Price, President & Chief Development Officer, Hexagon Energy; Tyson Utt, Co-Founder and Manager for CEP Solar*

The three presenters addressed the increasing permitting challenges solar developers are facing in a growing number of localities, indicating solar permitting is becoming one of the biggest and controversial issues local decision makers are facing. They discussed the misinformation an increasing number of citizens are using to prevent solar development from happening.

Mr. Hodsoll began by pointing out that solar development is an enabler of economic development, not just from the solar itself, but how it enables other economic development opportunities. He cited solar installation and employment statistics compiled by the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA), the national trade association for solar in the U.S.

He used Microsoft in Mecklenburg County as just one example of the 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies with carbon reduction goals that will make major decisions on where to expand their operations and locate new facilities based on their ability to receive renewable energy to meet these carbon reduction goals.

Mr. Price offered a brief evolution of solar development and permitting in Virginia and discussed the learning curve both local decision makers and solar developers have made since solar development first began in the 2015-2016 time frame, noting that early projects represented a new land use for Virginia localities. Designs and permits were very basic with very little detail. As those early solar projects got built both the counties and solar developers learned valuable lessons on what works or doesn’t work, how projects looked and how people felt about them, leading to long-lasting negative impressions that have been hard to overcome.

Companies like his have significantly increased the amount of time and outreach they provide county commissions and residents to help develop well thought out projects, ordinances and comprehensive plans. They also work with counties to explore options to improve the revenues localities receive from projects, either through local taxes or working involving local businesses in the communities as part of the project.

Tyson Utt with CEP Solar concurred with the previous statements made by Mr. Hodsoll and Price and added and highlighted the value that clean energy companies such as those represented bring to rural communities and emphasized the importance of staying engaged with local decision makers as well with the Authority to get educational resources out to 95 counties plus municipalities and expressed that he was encouraged with what the various public and private stakeholders have achieved to date.

Mr. Hodsoll related his experience in having attended over 50 Board of Supervisors meetings where when a solar project is proposed there is a fear that it would fundamentally change the county in a way they don’t want, and that the Supervisors who would like to support the project don’t see it as worth the political cost by upsetting their friends and neighbors by approving projects.

Additional questions were asked by both members and guests until Ms. Robb because of time constraints at the meeting, tabled what would undoubtably require continued discussion at future meetings.

**Approval of December 13, 2022 Meeting Minutes**

Mr. Robb asked whether there were and corrections or amendments to the December 13, 2022 minutes. Hearing none she asked for a motion to approve. Jo Anne Scott Web made a motion, which was seconded by Skyler Zunk. A vote was taken, and the minutes were approved unanimously by members present in the physical location. One member, Jon Hillis, joined remotely due to an injury but had not yet been approved by a vote of the members present in the physical meeting location as required by FOIA regulations and his vote did not count. Prior to any other votes, Ms. Robb made a motion to allow Mr. Hillis to participate remotely. Ms. Webb seconded the motion, and it was approved by all members physically present.

**Presentation by First Solar**

**Presenters:** *Karmen Blanco-Hartfield, Director, Government Affairs and Karen Drozdiak, Director of Global Environmental, Social, Governance and Sustainability*

Ms. Blanco-Hartfield gave an overview of First Solar, pointing out that they are a solar manufacturer and not solar developers. Her presentation centered on First Solar’s American made cadmium telluride (CdTe) thin film solar panels, the proven safety of these panels, their manufacturing efficiency compared to conventional silicon solar panels, and the need to dispel misinformation about the safety of thin film cadmium telluride panels that county decision makers are using to disallow these panels in certain counties.

Ms. Drozdiak gave additional background on First Solar, noting that of the ten largest solar manufacturers, First Solar is the only company not also manufacturing in China. She went on to discuss how cadmium-telluride CdTe solar is uniquely American, having been invented in the U.S., and that it supplies 40% of the U.S. utility-scale PV market and 5% of the global market.

She discussed their under-one-roof manufacturing process, the environmental and economic advantages of CdTe over crystalline silicon solar panels, and it’s proven safety, stating there is currently 370 MW of First Solar CdTe panels in Virginia, and that First Solar would like to “level the playing field” for their technology and avoid policies that discriminate against it because of misinformation.

**Interconnection challenges**

**Presenters*:*** *Tony Smith, President, Secure Futures and Nitzan Goldberger, Director of Policy and Business Development, New Leaf Energy, Inc.*

Mr. Smith, representing the [Virginia Distributed Solar Alliance](https://vasolaralliance.org/) addressed current issues surrounding interconnection of behind-the-meter (net metered) solar between 250 kW and one megawatt. The discussion detailed interconnection requirements imposed by Dominion Energy beginning in December 2022 that are greatly driving up cost for these systems. These include requirements that the developer or system owner bear the costs to install Direct Transfer Trip controls at the nearest substation, along with dark fiber from the solar energy system back to the substation ($150 to $200 thousand per mile). These upgrades can drive up the cost for solar installed on schools and similar sized facilities by more than 40% and have resulted in a large number of projects being downsized or put on hold.

The Virginia Distributed Solar Alliance asked Dominion to put these requirements on hold pending the outcome of an interconnection workgroup convened by the SCC that likely will not conclude for two or more years, saying that solar developers and their customers cannot afford such a delay because it has a negative impact on school districts, jobs, low income communities, ratepayers, and even taxpayers citing the federal Inflation Reduction Act, claiming Virginia taxpayers will be subsidizing solar projects in other, more solar-friendly states.

Ms. Goldberger, representing the [Coalition for Community Solar Access](https://communitysolaraccess.org/) addressed interconnection challenges facing community solar projects connecting to Dominion’s side of the meter brought on by the rapid growth of community solar projects brought on by the passage of the Clean Economy Act (VCEA), which calls for 1,100 MW of solar three MW and less, and legislation enabling shared solar in Virginia. These initiatives combined resulted in a significant increase in the number of interconnection applications from the solar community and indicated that the interconnection regulations adopted prior to the VCEA and shared solar initiatives did not anticipate such rapid growth.

Ms. Goldberger said interconnection studies are taking 12-16 months for individual projects. She pointed out there are currently around 3,800 MW of interconnection study requests in Dominion’s queue, and that once the solar developer receives their interconnection study they may be faced with millions of dollars in distribution system upgrade costs.

She said there were some easy to implement best practices that can be implemented that can help speed up the interconnection process and help reduce costs through non-DTT methods and said they were looking forward to working collaboratively with other stakeholders within the SCC’s regulatory process to make changes.

Katharine Bond with Dominion said their recent interconnection procedures for distributed solar systems as large as three MW are based on safety and that if they “get it wrong”, the consequences from a safety perspective are very high, saying that without an effective trip, the electricity from the solar can back feed on the system and cause electrocution and that it is not a matter of convenience but literally a matter of life and death.

She discussed the challenges of two-way power flow at substations that were not designed for that, and the reasons they evaluate interconnection requests the way they do – one at a time in the order they were received, with subsequent requests evaluated based on the assumption the previous projects were installed in order to calculate the impact to the grid accordingly.

**Appointment of a New Authority Chair**

Ms. Robb moved the conversation to the issue of her replacement as Chair when her term expires at the end of June, indicating that the Authority’s enabling legislation limits members to just two consecutive four-year terms. She asked members to consider whether they would like to serve a Chair or Vice Chair should Skyler Zunk, the current Vice Chair, wish to become Chair. The topic will be taken up at a meeting to be scheduled in June.

She also pointed out inconsistencies in member terms pointing out that several members were appointed to terms ending in 2026 and 2027. The enabling legislation creating the Authority, however, has a sunset date of 2025 unless there in a legislative change to extend the expiration date.

Ms. Bond asked whether the Authority might be combined with the Clean Energy Advisory Board since they also consider solar issues.

The discussion moved on to the Annual Report, its timing, content, length and the need to complete it by the October 15 deadline. In this regard, Deputy Secretary Jenkins Indicated that because of the volume of reporting the Governor’s office and the legislators receive from Boards and Authorities, they want to ensure reports are as concise as possible and that they would likely develop a template for these groups.

**Public Comments**

Ms. Robb called for comments from members of the public both present in the room and online. None were offered.

**Adjournment**

Upon a motion duly made by Ms. Webb and seconded by Mr. Duncan, the meeting was adjourned just before noon.