

Royalston Historic District Commission

Royalston, Massachusetts, 01368

Meeting Minutes

Date: May 3rd, 2012

Attendees: Peter Kraniak (Chair), Celt Grant (Vice-Chair), Andy West, Bob Casinghino, Clarence Rabideau, Ken Lively, Pierre Humblet (Secretary), Rick Carrier.

Before the meeting opened some members examined a photovoltaic panel that had been brought by Ken to the Town Hall entrance. The night was falling but one could notice that the panel was black with embedded silver lines and that it was reflecting light.

Peter opened the meeting at 7:36. It is a special meeting to discuss Ken and Andrea Lively's application 2012-04-05 to install 36 photovoltaic panels on roofs at 5 on the Common. A public hearing had been held on April 19. All HDC members listed above are active voters except Ken and Pierre, as applicant and abutter respectively.

Ken started by distributing and explaining a modified application:

- All 36 panels would be "mono" black and would be installed on the south barn roof, following the slope (about 6" above the roof) as discussed previously.
- Electrical connections would be through the roof or through the back wall; none would be visible from the road.
- There are trees shading the south side on the barn (3 on the property, others on the Parsonage land) but the loss of efficiency is minimal and none would be taken down.
- The panels have a 25 year warranty (but the efficiency decreases by about 1% per year) and they would be leased for 20 years, with an option to buy it back after 7 years. The lease include all maintenance and monitoring (this stops if the lease is bought back).

Ken then discussed the option of installing the panels in the backyard, in an E to W line close to the N end of the property. This would necessitate cutting many trees. Just bringing the machines would cost \$1000 and the wood is of poor quality and would not bring much money. There are also issues with accessing the back of the property and possible negative reaction from abutters. Andy proposed that this approach not be considered further. Pierre objected and pointed out that

- Using the backyard would minimize visibility from the road, and this is the primary objective of all HDCs. The guidelines followed by Ken for the roof installation are only relevant when no better solution can be found.
- The Lively's own about 4 acres of land, more than most in that part of the Common. It is former farmed flat land, although trees have been allowed to grow back. There is plenty of space available.
- Installing panels require cutting trees but not clearing the land. Ground mounted panels are compatible with ground cover such as blueberry bushes and can be easily masked by remaining trees. Removing roots can be expensive and is not necessary in this case,

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although the Lively's may decide to do it to improve the land beyond the minimum required.

- Allowing panels to be on a roof when land is available would be a very bad precedent as few suitable roofs exist in the District. If we want to allow panels in the District we will have to rely on ground arrays. In his opinion we should be ready to allow them and accept that they be masked by fast growing plants (as a condition of approval). Ken pointed out that decisions should be made on a case by case basis, without considering this case as a precedent.

Bob then intervened. He pointed out that, even if we wish it wasn't, a precedent would have been created. More broadly he said that he had talked to the Salem HDC and they have rightly pointed out that we should not follow their guidelines blindly, as the situations are different. The Royalston landscape is open with views that are very different from those of Salem, which is urban. In Salem, auxiliary buildings are usually located in the back and are almost invisible from far away. This is not the case for us.

He also pointed out that Ken had made a wise decision to keep the panels together and that black is better than blue. However the panels still have clear stripes and are reflective. Our challenge is the overall view of the Common. We have managed to keep it relatively pure over the years. Recently we have pushed back on above-ground gas tanks and we have fought to preserve the parsonage chimney. This is an even more important matter. There will be a significant structure on the barn roof, probably for a long time. The proposed mitigation is giving him pause for thought. It will still be visible, it won't be attractive, and it is not good for the overall view of the Common.

Ken explained the history of the project. He pointed out that Astrum Solar has been the most helpful of the companies he has worked with, and that the proposed panel is the best they have.

Celt then explained that he had struggled with the issue. He recognizes how the Historical District is well conserved and pristine and how hard it is to maintain it that way. But he also came to appreciate how hard it is to make the panels acceptable and least objectionable. Ken's efforts have brought him around.

Ken then recalled that he walks a lot all around the district and that in his opinion there is only one other building over which solar panels could ever be installed without disfiguring the Historic District.

Clarence said that he agreed with Celt on a lot of ways about the value of the District and Ken's efforts. However he has a hard time accepting that the panels will be on a roof and visible from a public way. In fact he cannot accept that.

Rick stated that he would like to have guidelines. Unfortunately we are put in front of a fact without enough preparation. Some Districts have pretty strict rules and do not accept panels at all. We could allow a small fraction of the panel area to be visible, as we have done in the past on Frye Hill Rd. He then explained that recently he was on the road near the fire station and he noticed that he could see the entirety of the barn roof. He does not like the argument that cars and pedestrians will only see the roof briefly. Some will stop and look. Our rule should consider a standstill view.

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Andy wondered if guidelines would have helped in Ken's situation, or even next time. They are all similar and in the end it's a judgment call.

Rick continued and recalled that when Chris Skelly (from the MHC) came to talk to the Royalston HDC many years ago, he had stressed that the commission should not rely on any kind of planting to hide undesirable features. The next owner or Mother Nature could change everything, and it would take years for trees to grow back tall enough. We need to pay attention, even if 90% of the people coming by will not notice the panels.

Andy agreed that we should develop guidelines, but thought we will never have perfect guidelines.

Bob said that a number of questions would arise. Should we allow any visible photovoltaic systems? If yes, which one should we allow? If we allow them, there will be myriads details to specify.

Andy proposed we could just use the Salem's guidelines.

Bob replied that Salem has warned us not to use their guidelines "as is". Our situation is different from theirs. We must consider the whole landscape whereas Salem is more localized. We could have a very long discussion about it, but now is not the time

Clarence pointed out that the proposed panels are not flat black, they reflect. We don't know how they will look like, and once they are up it will be too late. We are buying a pig in a poke.

Peter mentioned the guidelines of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He added that what Ken is proposing could look like shingles but he is still unsure about how he will proceed.

Andy said that he thought Ken had done an excellent work with his proposal. He liked the change from blue to black panels. He doesn't like ground arrays. What Ken proposes will have the minimum possible visibility.

As all the committee members had all given their opinion, Ken wished to say a few closing words, summarized as follows: It is a challenge to live in a Historic District. The proposal is based on well-accepted guidelines; they come from many sources but all say more or less the same thing. This proposal would not be precedent setting; each situation will have to be handled case by case. The proposed panels are the best ones available from Astrum Solar, and he worked with that company because it has been most helpful and responsive. Decisions should be based on facts, not emotions or opinions.

At this point Rick made a motion to reject the application. Bob seconded. Bob, Clarence and Rick voted in favor, Andy, Celt and Peter against (as written above, Ken and Pierre recused themselves in this matter).

Andy then made a new motion to accept the application. Celt seconded. Andy, Celt and Peter voted in favor, Bob, Clarence and Rick against.

The chair read the following sentence from the HDC bylaw: "The concurring vote of a majority of the members of the Commission shall be necessary to issue a certificate of appropriateness...". He stated that according to the bylaw we needed four votes in favor and thus the application was not accepted. Andy concurred with that interpretation.

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The commission then discussed the possibility of considering a certificate of Hardship. Pierre explained that the reasons for hardship can be other than financial, for example a handicap may justify a non-appropriate access ramp. Bob reminded the group that financial statements must be provided to document a financial hardship. Ken said he had prepared a hardship application but he did not submit it.

Meeting adjourned

Bob made a motion to close the meeting. Clarence seconded. It was unanimously approved. Peter closed the meeting around 10 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "P.A. Humblet". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pierre A. Humblet,
Secretary