**Bethlehem Conservation Commission (BCC) meeting**

**November 27th, 2023**

**Meeting minutes**

**Location:** Bethlehem Town Library

**Committee members present:** Ivan Ash, Margaret Gale, Cheryl Jensen, Chris Jensen (BCC alternate), Betsey Phillips, Vivian Winterhoff

**Apologies from:** Rachelle Lyons, Veronica Morris (Select Board Liaison),

**In attendance:** Barry Zitser (Transfer Station Committee), Pam Evans (Sugar Hill resident), Julia Brabec (Bethlehem resident with Eversource ROW)

Cheryl called the meeting to order at 6:03pm.

**Eversource Transmission Lines Rebuild Projects: Presentation by Eversource**

**Introductions**

BCC members introduced themselves, then those representing Eversource:

* Ashley Friend, Eversource permitting contact
* Sam Harris, Engineer
* Tom Tetreau, wetlands scientist with Stantec. Stantec is contracted by Eversource to do the permitting for X178-3, the most Northern segment of the rebuild.
* Matthew Koehler, Community Relations
* Jennifer Codispoti, Eversource Project Services (outreach to landowners)
* Lindsay White, GZA project manager, contracted by Eversource for U199 implementation.

Finally, members of the public who were in attendance introduced themselves.

**Presentation**

OPGW = Short for “fiber optic and shield wire”

**Permitting**

There will be three (local) permits:

* Wetlands Standard Dredge & Fill (SDF) permits,
* Shoreland Permits (for Miller Pond and the Ammonoosuc River – because work will take place within 250 ft of the river),
* AoT permits for upland disturbances.

Fish and Game and Natural Heritage Bureau permits need to be given before NHDES permits are approved.

X-178 and U199 SDF applications are expected to be submitted to NHDES in December 2023, the AoT permit application in January 2024, followed by any local permits that may be required.

**Construction and restoration phases**

Civil construction = preparing the sites, incl dump trucks (for gravel used for roads in upland areas, outside of wetlands, about 6in thick + thin layer on top), timber mat road construction (about 16ft wide), forager for transporting mats, excavators.

After picking up mats, mats may need to be reinstalled and permits re-applied for if any remedial work to the lines and structures need to be done after construction has finished.

Gravel access roads are not seeded and stay in place. The work pads around the pole/towers are reduced in size in the restoration process and reseeded.

If the access road is not wanted by a landowner (i.e. they don’t want it to stay in place after construction has taken place), topsoil can be pushed to the side before construction and replaced once construction completed, then straw laid down and seeds sown.

A comment was made about ATVers and Snowmobilers being attracted to such access roads. Eversource responded that landowners can request for gates to be installed.

Notices to towns and affected landowners were sent out in April, May, and October. Different public information sessions were held. There are **project websites (**[**www.eversource.com/X178-Line-Project**](http://www.eversource.com/X178-Line-Project) **and** [**www.eversource.com/U199-Line-Project**](http://www.eversource.com/U199-Line-Project)**)** and a hotline to get in touch via phone and email – see number provided on the websites. Door to door outreach has also been done.

*Action:* Ashley will provide list of roads in Bethlehem that will be used.

There was some discussion around what roads would be used for access along Cherry Valley Road – whether private or town-owned.

**Wetlands impact and remediation**

Eversource confirmed that they work with landowners to minimize impact, especially for wetlands, as much as possible. They have seen good revegetation in wetlands that have been impacted by their work on lines in the past. The goal is for the wetlands and land to look as close as possible to pre-existing conditions. At the point of the return of 85% vegetative cover, a wetland is considered stable. This is a minimum per federal stormwater pollution prevention plan requirements.

Mats can be 6-10 layers deep to minimize impact. Photo D142 on slide 6 was just one year after construction. For X178 a full vernal pool survey was done, and they have avoided the vernal pools in planning the work, even if they will come close. Vernal pool depressions are flagged, so contractors and all Eversource project staff know where the pools are. Contractors and Eversource on-site staff are trained to look out for and report species sightings. They are aware of the species in the area and pay attention every morning. Fish and Game put certain conditions in the permits, including immediately reporting viewing of species, and occasionally biological monitors need to be hired. Weekly on-site meetings happen, and include environmental aspects. Weekly construction monitoring via photo documentation also takes place. Weekly project updates are sent to Town officials.

There will be monitoring for one year post construction at federal and state levels.

Cheryl brought up the wetlands study commissioned to study the potential impacts of Northern Pass in 2015. The BCC knows that within the construction area, there are vernal pools, one 37-acre wetland, and brooks that flow into the Ammonoosuc River.

It was pointed out that Bethlehem has an aquifer ordinance that Eversource will need to take into account.

**Schedule**

July 2024 is the estimated start date for construction of both projects, but not necessarily in Bethlehem.

Another pre-construction session will be held in spring 2024 for X178.

**Discussion around the height of the towers**

Heights of towers will vary by site. Tower height also needs to take into account potential future demand. The National Electrical Safety Code (NESC) requires a minimum clearance of 21 ft for 115KV. Generally, heights will increase at road crossings to be in line with clearance regulations. The current average height of towers in general is 48.31 feet. The future average height is expected to be 63.11 feet. That’s a difference of 14 feet.

Future heights for towers/poles on U199, of the 5 being replaced, are as follows: 3 of them are expected to “grow” by less than 10 feet, another by 14.1 feet, another by 18.7 feet “due to terrain”.

It is expected that on average towers will be 14 feet higher than existing towers in Bethlehem. They are still working on determining the final heights of each structure. The plan is to share more specific, finalized information at the spring information session.

*Actions:*

Jennifer will obtain information on current average tower heights in Bethlehem.

Jennifer will find out what including what the height will be crossing Rt 302 in Bethlehem.

**Location of new towers**

Lines and towers will not shift to the side of existing ones. Old towers will be replaced in front or behind existing ones, so they will “move forward and backward”, i.e. new towers will be offset in line with existing lines.

**EMF radiation concerns**

Eversource can carry out assessments pre- and post-construction with individual landowners.

**Does the project have anything to do with rebuilding distribution lines?**

Will 3-phase power be provided in future? This project is not tied to any distribution upgrades. That is a different department within Eversource.

**What is the process for determining when update work is needed?**

Reasons for replacement are: Age (last construction about 1970), structural damage to poles, code requirements (e.g. height clearances).

**Casella NCES “Seep Project” applications (Muchmore Rd, #419-25)**

This application relates to court-ordered clean-up work per the Conservation Law Foundation’s (CLF) court case against Casella. There are two applications that relate to this project. The deadlines to notify NHDES that BCC wants to provide comment are as follows:

* Dec 20th, 2023 for the Standard Dredge & Fill application, NHDES file number 2023-03087.
* Dec 27th, 2023 for the AoT application, NHDES file number 231117-231.

There was a question about why the BCC only received notification of the submission of the applications so late, on Monday Nov 27th, so as to have very little time to review the applications and decide – as a committee - whether or not the BCC wants to provide comment. Are these letters being received by email or hardcopy? (Postage delays may account for the delay of letters sent by NHDES and others.)

*Actions:*

Vivian to ask Nicole about how and when applications and letters are received, including why is there such a delay between the date of the letters, date the Town Clerk signs applications, and the BCC receive them?

Cheryl will reach out to CLF contact to receive an update on this project and the court case from them, and let BCC members know their response. She will also notify NHDES to say BCC is going to comment.

Betsey and Ivan will look at both applications, and draft any comment letter, should we want to comment.

Cheryl made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8pm. Motion seconded by Vivian. Motion unanimously passed. Meeting adjourned at 8pm.

*Respectfully submitted by Vivian Winterhoff, Recording Secretary.*