

THE BEDFORD CITIZEN

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

JUNE 5, 2016

As the alternate on the HDC who ended up casting the final vote, I think it's fair the disappointed members of the First Parish understand why my final vote was cast the way it was. While I'm sure it won't make the members happier, it may make the members better able to understand the why.

Factors affecting my decision:

1. We couldn't see the actual panels to be used on any installation anywhere. A photo shop modification to a photo of the church, while approximating the look, still isn't accurate due to the lack of specifics about installation height, because the engineering hadn't been done yet to get a final panel count with dimensions and because things like reflectivity of the surface are very hard to model in Photoshop. (Especially with the matte finish as noted.) Not seeing the desired panels installed on a building with the proposed features made it very hard to feel comfortable with the look.
2. Once approved we can't un-approve the panels in 25 years or so when they reach end of life. So if we approve the panels and later come to the conclusion they are terrible, the permit has been approved and solar can stay permanently. That finality means I had to be 100% sure it would look right or I was failing in my duties on the HDC, which are to preserve the historic look of the buildings in the historic district not to find ways to support alternative energy. I couldn't be 100% sure the panels would be unobtrusive.
3. Normally when a plan is submitted to the board it is very specific. It includes dimensions, color palettes, designs, you name it. For the reason that the work for engineering couldn't start without approval, this information couldn't be

provided in detail. This isn't something I've ever experienced in the board before and it was a compounding factor for me personally in making the decision against it.

4. I solicited opinions from many residents in town. I found people both for and against it. Of the people for it, the general opinion was it won't be too visible so they had no problem with it. These were people I respect and whose opinion I value, and the opinion was I don't love the way solar panels usually look but if they aren't too visible they are okay. I also had many people against it and those that were, were vehement in their opposition. They hated the way solar panels look on old buildings. I received emails and texts from those opposed and they tended to be the people I knew as history buffs. Even when describing the installation as low, matte finish, tapered edge with the critter guard and black on black, they were all still very skeptical. So no one I spoke to alone in my circle of acquaintances (outside of church members) loved the idea of seeing them on the roof. They were at best indifferent and at worst outraged.

5. I had it brought to my attention that there were things I was not considering and that may not have been part of the churches considerations such as the safety issues posed to fire fighters for example. It turns out large solar arrays can make fighting fires extra dangerous to fire fighters. Power can't always be shut off to the building, the panels represent a hazard due to the slippery surface causing falls, creating a water proof and insulating layer on the roof that fire fighters can't vent through and the result is limited access to the roof for them to do their work. I was also informed solar panels aren't currently easily recycled and may be classed as toxic waste depending on the panel, the manufacturer etc. Something I had never even thought of. I wasn't sure what else I wasn't thinking of or aware of, although I did try to do my homework, but in the end this consideration was a small one as my job wasn't to evaluate the safety or long term environmental impact of the install, just the impact to the historic building.

I feel terrible that in the end I wasn't able to vote to approve the installation. It was a very hard decision personally. I started lukewarm about the idea but the amazing level of attention to detail and planning, the passion of the church members and my own concerns about global warming pushed me a long ways towards approval. In the end it was an agonizingly close decision for me.

Prior to the meeting I read the relevant sections of state laws for HDC and solar, I read the federal governments guidelines on preservation and solar, I looked for stories good and bad about solar installations on historic buildings and a common theme arose. Solar panels on the new parts of a building are fine, buildings evolve and grow, but where possible hide the solar or restrict it to new construction as solar panels tend to be very discordant with what people associate with history.

So my position is understood. I believe global warming is real and support solar power. I personally looked at solar for my own house, despite it being a 200 year old building, because I do believe we have to reduce our carbon footprint. When my roof was deemed not structurally sound enough to support panels due to age, I found an alternative in leasing panels built elsewhere in MA. I drive a diesel car that averages over 40 mpg and a motorcycle that does over 50 mpg. I have mostly LED lighting in my house with some fluorescent, and am constantly telling the kids to turn things off. I try to do my part more than many, less than some, but I need no one to educate me on global warming.

I feel we have already reached a tipping point where the need for CO₂ reduction and global warming are established facts and only those with their head up their respective behinds would deny that.

With all that said, given the rate of improvement in technology, given the time spent to date building CO₂ up in the atmosphere and the timescale that will be required to curb the problem, waiting a year to put panels on the church won't have a dramatic impact on global warming but may have a huge impact on the solar panel installation and final aesthetics. If we wait a year so we can see the panels to be used installed on a less important building that would help my vote. If the new part of the building was done first then based on seeing the look and knowing the installation would be unobtrusive, the old part of the building was done, that would be a reasonable approach.

In the end, when I made up my mind, my decision was based on the fact a delay in installation won't make the difference between global warming or not but it may make the difference between a church that is both green and has protected the historic nature of the building or an installation that is an eyesore and destroys

the character of the most beautiful historic building in Bedford. We should be able to have both solar power and aesthetics that don't disrupt the historic beauty of the church. My charge was protection of history and that had to be my priority.

Thanks,

Chris Weisz

HDC Alternate Member