

DRAFT
Hartford Ad-Hoc Climate Advisory Committee Minutes
January 6, 2020

Present: Jack Spicer, Erik Krauss, Alan Johnson, Geoff Martin, Matt Osborn; Peter Merrill, Simon Dennis

Jack called the meeting to order at 5:45.

Additions/Changes to the Agenda: The Committee discussed whether or not to approve ballot initiative language without everyone present. Jack said he would like to approve something at this meeting.

Simon and Peter joined the meeting at 5:51, and with almost all members present, the Committee decided not to make changes to the agenda.

Review/Approve 12-18-19 Minutes: Erik moved to approve the minutes as presented. Alan seconded, and the motion passed with 6 votes in favor, and one abstention from Peter.

Review and discuss ballot initiative proposals: Geoff reviewed VLCT's and Lori Hirschfield's comments on the establishment of a reserve fund. He stressed that a reserve fund has to be created for a specific purpose, with details on how the funds will be used.

Alan thought that the Committee could use some of the language from the carbon fee question to include in the language for the reserve fund ("support the transition away from fossil fuels, etc.). He suggested that the carbon fee could be used to replenish the reserve fund.

Geoff then updated the committee on his conversations with the Town's Finance Director and Johanna Miller from VNRC about the carbon fee. The Finance Director felt that the administrative costs of collecting a fee would be low, but questioned whether the fee would be enforceable. Johanna had the same concern about enforceability, as she questioned whether or not the State had the authority to collect data on fuel deliveries. Alan and Erik asked why the state isn't collecting this information. They wondered whether it was something the State hasn't given itself the authority to do, or if it was a federal issue. Erik also asked how the state is currently collecting a fuel tax if they cannot collect fuel delivery data. Geoff said he would ask Johanna to clarify.

Peter cautioned against pursuing any initiative without being very careful and precise. It could result in a lawsuit, which would be very expensive for the Town. Peter said that he is most interested in the reserve fund and carbon neutrality for the municipality options.

Geoff asked whether the reserve fund was something that needed to be approved by the voters, or could be included in the budget and approved by the Selectboard. Jack read a definition from VLCT, which stated that reserve funds could only be created by the voters. They are seen as a direction to the Selectboard stating how the money has to be used, and the Selectboard cannot reassign the money from a reserve fund for any other purpose. Alan pointed out that this would mean that a reserve fund would survive Selectboards.

Jack said that the reserve fund could be used to pay for a consultant to work on the action plan. Simon said that the value of going to the voters with a ballot initiative is to achieve something that can't be achieved by going through the Selectboard, or to get a sense of the voters' appetite for something. Both Alan and Simon thought the budget request for a consultant should go through the Selectboard.

Jack wondered if the reserve fund could be used to support Geoff's work as Energy Coordinator.

Alan proposed the idea of an internal carbon fee – the Town would charge itself a carbon fee for anything it does. Erik asked if that could be implemented by the board (rather than through the voters).

Alan noted that if the reserve fund for the internal carbon fee was established by the voters, then a future Selectboard wouldn't be able to undo it.

Erik argued that the focus should be on the broader community rather than on municipal operations, because of the relative insignificance of the municipality's carbon emissions. While he was still not convinced that a local carbon fee is a perfect solution, he felt it was likely the best chance of bending the emissions curve. Peter suggested that, instead of a carbon fee, the Planning Commission could play a role – for projects to be approved, they have to be carbon neutral. Alan and Erik noted that the Town is working on net-zero new construction standards. Peter argued that there isn't enough time to sell something as significant as a carbon fee for the March election. Whatever the Committee recommends for a ballot initiative should be something that people can easily get behind.

Peter suggested the Committee should pursue incremental change. Erik argued that creating a reserve fund should be the bare minimum (if not exploring a carbon fee). The Committee discussed the legality of creating a reserve fund as described at the Committee's 12/18 meeting. Peter wondered if the question could be phrased to say the funds would be spent "as directed by the study".

Simon suggested saying the fund would be used to, "support the transition away from fossil fuels" or, "support the transition to carbon neutrality". Jack reminded the Committee of Dillon's rule, and the need for the Town to derive its authority from the state. The Committee read the email from VLCT.

Geoff said he didn't think that either the carbon fee or the reserve fund questions should go on the ballot. He argued that it seemed too rushed, and that including either question could end up backfiring and harming the Town's chances of meeting its goals. Instead, he suggested that the Committee focus on getting money for a consultant. Alan wondered if it would really help to ask the question of the voters whether or not the Town should explore a carbon fee.

Jack suggested that the Committee could ask for enough money to pay a consultant, and some extra money to get projects started.

Simon felt that the Town and Committee should provide visionary leadership in order to preserve future life on earth. The Committee should put something on the ballot that it knows needs to happen, even if it is difficult. Alan responded that the projects we know need to happen are either already active, or need more research. Simon suggested going back to proposals #3 (carbon neutrality for the municipality) or #4 (banning fossil fuel heating systems). He argued that #3 would give the Town more leverage to fund things like electric dump trucks, etc. Peter agreed that #3 is a good place to start. The Committee discussed whether #3 should include the School Board, and the group agreed that that would need to be decided at a School Board meeting.

Alan liked #3 because he felt it is a story that sells – Hartford became carbon neutral and continued to deliver services, made people more comfortable, etc.

The Committee discussed the difference between carbon neutral and net-zero, as well as the issue of carbon offsets. Alan said he would like to see any offsets occur within Town borders. Most agreed they would like to keep offsets to a minimum, and stay clear of a plan that is basically all offsets.

The group discussed using the term decarbonization, which does not allow for offsets, but wondered if it would be possible to achieve that goal by 2027. Other proposals included “fossil fuel free” or “100% renewable”, both of which would still allow for wood and biodiesel. But the Committee agreed that both of those terms could lead to unintended consequences if the wood/biodiesel wasn’t sourced properly.

Simon said he was in favor of carbon neutral – he thought it is the most ambitious, and would cover all municipal operations. Jack proposed the following language: “Shall the operation of the Town of Hartford’s (and Town of Hartford School District’s, with approval) municipal infrastructure and equipment be required to achieve carbon neutrality by 2027?”. Peter pointed out that the State might set a similar target, so passing this would send a message from the Town to the State.

The Committee discussed whether or not to vote on the language as proposed by Jack. Alan said he would like to include something about offsets. Erik agreed that offsets are an area that the Town should be careful about. Alan proposed saying that any offsets would need to be approved by the Energy Commission and Conservation Commission. The Committee agreed that the Commissions would not have the power to do that. Simon asked if the word “operation” was intended to limit what “carbon neutral” applies to, and if so argued that the goal should be decarbonization rather than carbon neutrality.

The Committee agreed to include “development” and “maintenance” in the question to explicitly state what “carbon neutrality” applies to. It also agreed that this proposal, while aggressive, is not something that directly affects residents (as opposed to a carbon fee) and therefore may be easier for people to get behind.

Simon moved that the Committee recommend to the Selectboard the inclusion of the following Warrant item on the March 3, 2020 Town meeting ballot:

“Shall the operation, development, and maintenance of the Town of Hartford’s (and Town of Hartford School District, with approval) municipal infrastructure and equipment be required to achieve carbon neutrality by 2027?”

Alan seconded. Six members voted in favor of the motion, and Peter abstained. The motion passed.

The meeting adjourned at 7:51.

Respectfully submitted,

Geoff Martin, Clerk