

Battery project sparks tension in Tewksbury

Board of Health, Select Board, residents weigh in

TEWKSBURY — Members of the Select Board and Board of Health clashed in a joint meeting Thursday evening as the two boards met for a discussion on a controversial battery storage project proposed for Hillman Street.

The proposal covers a 4.3-acre area of already developed land in the area of 73 Hillman St., where 125 megawatts would be stored in batteries housed in separate containers, which proponent East Point Energy says in its project page can power nearly 125,000 homes for four hours.



Residents in the area of the proposed battery site, many of whom live in the neighboring Emerald Court neighborhood, have been voicing opposition to the plan since last year. With an upcoming Feb. 6 deadline for concerned residents to submit questions or comments to the state’s Energy Facilities Siting Board about the proposed site, the Select Board and Board of Health met for a public dialogue.

As Town Manager John Curran put it, though, the town has little decision-making power in projects like these. The Energy Facilities Siting Board has the ultimate say in approving the project, but the town and its individual boards and departments can petition to be interveners in the proposal. Curran said the town intends to use the host community agreement tool to create conditions and concessions more favorable to the town and nearby residents.

“Taking a purely adversarial position on this project will deny the town the opportunity to incorporate more safety conditions through this process,” said Curran.

The host community agreement includes items like an agreement over a 20-year period that the annual payment in lieu of taxes would be a minimum of \$2 million to the town plus a 1% Community Preservation Act surcharge. Curran said those figures are likely to rise with the value of the project, but at a minimum it would bring the town \$40 million over that 20-year period.

The host community agreement also included safety standards and emergency preparedness measures, like a dedicated 30,000-gallon water supply for fires, a requirement for multiple entry points rated for large fire apparatuses, an alarm and emergency notification system with backup power and a plan for decommissioning

the site with a decommissioning bond of between \$3 million and \$6 million required by Hillman Energy Center LLC.

“If the project is never completed they still have to cover decommissioning, if the project is abandoned they still have to cover decommissioning,” said Curran.

Continue watchingThe Grammys are here with Kendrick Lamar leading the nomineesafter the ad

One concern among residents has been the effect such a facility would have on their own property values, which Curran said was accounted for in the host community agreement with the inclusion of a \$50,000 fund paid into by Hillman Energy Center and controlled by the town. The fund, Curran said, would be meant for residents within an area of 650 square feet around the facility who make claims of a direct property value impact to their homes from the facility. If claims are paid out, Hillman Energy Center would be perpetually responsible for replenishing the fund, Curran said.

Hillman Energy Center will also be responsible for applying for any required permitting for the project and is agreeing to on-site inspections and reviews by a third-party fire safety expert.

With fire safety and preparedness one of the top concerns for neighbors opposing the project, Select Board member Richard Russo asked proponents about what happens in the first 15 minutes after a fire breaks out in a facility like the one being proposed.

Mike Nicholas, a fire safety expert hired by the town, said an alarm would quickly be triggered, which would alert a central station that contacts local emergency dispatch.

“The Fire Department begins their dispatch, they show up on scene. There should be a response station or incident command post they can go to, a safe distance from the site, and they are able to see the optics of what is going on in that fire alarm panel,” said Nicholas.

The readings on that panel, Nicholas said, would inform the responding firefighters of what kind of incident they are dealing with.

“I may have smoke detectors going off and no gas, and my assumption at that point is I probably have an electrical fire. If I have gas detection showing up, I am starting to think there is some sort of thermal event involving the battery,” said Nicholas.

While this is happening, site representatives are automatically being informed of the incident at the battery site so they can respond themselves. The site is also designed in such a way that Nicholas said would make it more difficult for a fire to spread between different battery enclosures, so in many cases a fire can stay contained to a single enclosure.

“At that point we are simply managing the incident. We want the enclosure that is involved to consume itself in the fire, it burns off the stranded energy and it is a shorter duration incident,” said Nicholas.

In incidents of battery fires in California, Nicholas said there has been “universally” no impact to the air and water off site.

Select Board Chair Mark Kratman addressed the room, and said this process has been something town leadership and the residents are not used to, and that it has been “exhausting.”

“For us to be able to negotiate these things and to take your health and safety into consideration, we have to stay neutral so we can go in and we can fight for these types of things and make sure all the health and safety protocols are put in place,” said Kratman. “I would love to see every one of you up at the State House for the siting meeting, when they are going to be making this decision, because I think it will make a difference for what goes on.”

Members of the Board of Health were skeptical of the safety of the project.

“I can’t get away from the fact that there should be somebody on site,” said Board of Health member George Ferdinand.

Board of Health Chair Melissa Braga questioned the scope of the property value fund, and why Hillman Energy Center would not be willing to extend the eligible radius to 1,000 feet if they are confident the facility will not negatively impact nearby property values.

Special Counsel Jeffrey Bernstein said extending it would be possible in theory, but Hillman Energy Center would then have to prepare itself financially for a worst-case scenario, which could be significantly more expensive when extending the area outward.

Braga also questioned whether the Board of Health was being shut out of access to a \$250,000 fund put forward by Hillman Energy Center to reimburse intervening groups for experts they retain to speak on the project and its impacts. Curran responded by saying the money is budgeted for the town.

“And in theory we should all be swimming in the same direction,” said Curran. “If there is something the Board of Health wants to investigate, or have access to these experts, reach out to me and we’ll see if that is a possibility. This document is written for the town, and we’re all members of the town. It is not an exclusion of the Board of Health.”

“Unless we don’t go with what the town wants, or unless it is something that is different in our opinion with the town, correct?,” Braga responded.

“What is clear is the town will not fund two attorneys with two opposing positions,” said Curran.

“So the Board of Health, yes, is part of the town, but only if we don’t ask questions,” said Braga, drawing applause from the audience.

The contention between participants in the meeting rose from there, with Braga and Curran going back and forth about the funding and any supposed conditions attached to it. Select Board member James Mackey jumped in to Curran’s defense, telling Braga he “was taking all this flak for decisions this board has made.”

Later, Braga asked Curran what process the Board of Health should follow if they are seeking legal guidance and if Curran would assist them. Curran began to say they had already been doing that, when Select Board member Richard Russo interjected.

“Let’s be honest, you just don’t like what you’re hearing,” Russo said to Braga, who immediately responded.

“It’s not that I don’t like what I hear, it’s that when we had to petition to intervene, that took a long time,” said Braga, pointing to a level of “non-responsiveness” her board has received from the rest of the town on the matter.

Russo argued that all the boards are on equal footing, because no entity in town is actually making any decision on this proposal, only the Energy Facilities Siting Board.

“The only thing we are trying to do is trying to protect, and trying to provide safety precautions, and all the things everybody in this room is probably going to be mentioning over the next hour to hour and a half,” said Russo.

Residents' concerns

After more arguing between boards, residents finally got a chance to speak. The first to rise was William Martel, whose house is right across the street from the proposed site on Clinton Street, just 40 feet away from where a 30-foot wall would be build on the edge of the site.

“There is going to be a constant buzzing sound 24/7, enough to drive you crazy,” said Martel. “But my biggest fear is going to bed and never waking up. My house is in the danger zone, and some of these gasses the meters can’t even test for. If something goes wrong, I’ve been told word goes to Texas first, and after the Fire Department would be notified. How long would that take? How would I be notified? What are you going to do to assure my safety if this site goes in?”

After him was Dawn Sheehan, whose family owns much of the land in the area, who expressed concern over the potential spread of a particularly dangerous chemical if a fire were to occur: hydrogen fluoride.

“We have paid, out of our own pockets, for third-party expert testing,” said Sheehan. “You have said if we had data, to bring it to you, it is now literally staring you right in the face. This hydrogen fluoride can go half a mile.”

Nicholas responded to Sheehan’s claims by saying any hydrogenated gases dispersing from a battery would be “racing to the moon at about 45 miles an hour,” but there are too many variables to consider in any given case.

“So in an outdoor environment with wind conditions, relative humidity, temperature, when you do any plume analysis, the resulting analysis is only as good as your input values,” said Nicholas.

After several residents spoke on the issue, mainly with concerns or in opposition to the project, members of both boards were given one more opportunity to speak. Board of Health member Susan Amato spoke directly to the discourse that unfolded during the meeting.

“I never want to see the disrespect I’ve seen tonight at this meeting. It doesn’t matter who believes in what or who wants what, and I believe we are all on the same the side somehow,” said Amato.

Braga and Russo both apologized for their words during the meeting, and expressed a willingness to continue working together and communicating on the issue.

The Select Board will have a vote on the host community agreement in a meeting Wednesday. The town will submit discovery to the Energy Facilities Siting Board, which is due Feb. 6. The board will then conduct evidentiary hearings, with briefs and replies from all parties submitted after.