

Dear Councilmember Carter,

We have met only very briefly; I'm a former boardmember of the Minnesota Renewable Energy Society (MRES), and the former Conservation Chair for the North Star Chapter of the Sierra Club. My wife, Elizabeth Dickinson, and I are solar homeowners. I cannot be present to testify at today's hearing on the Planning Commission's proposed changes to the zoning code where solar installations are concerned, but I wanted to at least send an email outlining some serious concerns shared by many of us in the solar community.

My main, overarching concern with the proposed changes is that while esthetics are a legitimate issue and have their place, they simply must not be carelessly allowed to take precedence over the vital importance of solar photovoltaic (and solar thermal) installations in addressing energy/climate issues. (We allow dish TV antennas on buildings without complaint; these are hardly more vital than a solar array -- but they are very often uglier than any array I've seen.)

In the late 1980s, when I served both as a climate and energy activist, and as the National Speaker, for Greenpeace in the U.S., I was among the earlier lecturers crisscrossing the country and talking about what long-term climate shifts could mean to us all. The things we were most deeply concerned about then have begun happening almost everywhere even earlier than we had projected at that time. This culture has to make a priority shift, starting now, that elevates resources such as solar to a higher place than they have heretofore been given.

Here are my specific concerns with the Planning Commission's language:

* In the "Building design standards" section (63.110.), the proposed change of language from "The visibility of rooftop mechanical equipment shall be reduced..." to "The visual impact of rooftop equipment shall be reduced..." is well-intended but still leaves too much room for an interpretation that could block many perfectly sound and important solar installations. I would prefer first of all the addition of some qualifier -- e.g., "demonstrably negative visual impact", and some set of parameters that would reasonably define what sort of visual impact would be regarded as "demonstrably negative."

* At today's hearing, I think you will get an earful from David Boyce -- longtime Chair of the Board of MRES, who at last check was planning to testify -- about the "Solar energy system" section (65.921.). It's my understanding that David is particularly exercised about par. (a) (2.), which sets limits on how far a solar panel may extend above the ridge of a roof and could, as I read it, severely limit installations on homes that are in less-than-ideal solar locations where the ability to extend an array above the ridge can be critical. I believe this paragraph, and probably the entire section, need more careful work and more input from a greater number of experienced installers. But David can address this in much more detail than I, as he has firsthand experience with a system designed for such less-than-ideal circumstances. I urge you, and the entire Council, to absorb his remarks as fully as you can and to call upon the Planning Commission to address the concerns he will lay out.

Thanks for your attention in this. Sorry I can't be there to testify myself.

Sincerely,

Christopher Childs