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MASSACHUSETTS

Energy bill doesn't address siting fears

House aiming to get green measure to Healey soon as some worry single-minded goal shorts local concerns

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON — A Senate-passed bill featuring a streamlined approach to permitting and siting solar and energy storage projects in Massachusetts, featuring a consolidated permit for approving clean energy infrastructure instead of multi-

ple local, regional and state permits, could speed up reaching the state's renewable energy goals.

The legislation, developed by Gov. Maura Healey's administration with input from lawmakers, doesn't adjust the state's zoning law that keeps renewable energy projects exempt from regulation by cities and towns, other than to protect the "public

health, welfare and safety." Maintaining that so-called Dover Amendment exception is worrying, says Shutesbury Planning Board member Michael DeChiara.

"It's problematic because we're being heard, but the core issues on how to regulate are not being addressed," DeChiara said, pointing out that Shutesbury, Pelham and Wendell have each found it difficult to adopt bylaws to limit solar and energy storage systems.

"Municipalities are already very

constrained in what they can regulate," DeChiara said.

"An Act upgrading the grid and protecting ratepayers," as the comprehensive clean energy legislation bill is dubbed, outlines ways to maximize electrification of buildings and transportation, and cleared the state Senate in late June. With the House of Representatives set to take action on the bill, it could be ready to be signed into law by Healey by the end of July.

Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northamp-

ton, said she fully supports the legislation after pushing for amendments that will require the state to incentivize solar canopies on buildings or pavement when siting ground-mounted solar.

"The state will have to work on a full range of ways to prioritize solar on built and disturbed land, whether it is a parking lot or a brownfield," Comerford said. "I'm very pleased about that."

SEE ENERGY A5



Piper Brandt, 10, pushes Reagan Brandt off a raft on Damon Pond in Chesterfield Thursday afternoon. At left is Hazel Straight, 7, Wilder Brandt, 7 and at right, Emerson Straight, 8.

COOL FUN IN THE SUMMERTIME



Piper Brandt jumps into Damon Pond in Chesterfield to swim to her siblings and friends Thursday afternoon.

STAFF PHOTOS/CAROL LOLLIS

NORTHAMPTON

Edwards Church puts \$500K into Way Finders

Shift in parish investments to nonprofit will help affordable housing efforts

By ALEXANDER MACDOUGALL
Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON — Edwards Church in Northampton has announced a \$500,000 investment in Springfield nonprofit group Way Finders, as part of an effort to increase the availability of affordable housing projects in the region.

Michael McSherry, a senior minister at Edwards Church, emphasized that the \$500,000 was an investment, not a donation or a gift. The money is derived from the church moving existing investments it had in other market-based funds and reinvesting it instead into Way Finders.

"We were looking for a way our investments could be more in line with our values," McSherry said. "What can we do with it that has a more desirable outcome?"

Though the church still is using the money as any investor would, with hopes of earning money through annual interest with the possibility of being repaid in six years' time, McSherry noted that the Way Finders investment would earn a lower rate of return than a regular market fund investment. Though he declined to give the actual difference, McSherry said the church would stand to see only half the amount of growth through the new investment, comparing it to buying corporate bonds rather than regular stocks.

Edwards Church has maintained investment accounts as a sort of "rainy-day" fund for the past sev-



THE REV. MICHAEL MCSHERRY

SEE CHURCH A5

WARE

Mobile clinic increases access to opioid treatment

Behavioral Health Network's unit expands methadone availability beyond Springfield, Worcester clinics

By JAMES PENTLAND
Staff Writer

WARE — A new mobile methadone program has begun to plug a large gap in addiction treatment services in the region.

Behavioral Health Network, which runs drug treatment clinics in Springfield, Holyoke, Greenfield

and Orange, says the mobile program is the first of its kind in western Massachusetts.

Program Director Maile Shoul said those in the Ware area in need of methadone will no longer have to travel to Worcester or Springfield for treatment.

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PIONEER VALLEY

Bidenomics bypasses local cradle of industry

Projects from signature economic stimulus bills flow to other parts of U.S.

By SAIJEL KISHAN
Bloomberg News

President Joe Biden's trio of legislative packages designed to revive U.S. manufacturing prowess is already helping regions from upstate

New York to West Virginia. To the frustration of its local development agency, one that's getting left behind is a cradle of the American Industrial Revolution: the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts.

Powered by the Connecticut River, the region was once peppered with mills, as was much of New England. Its largest city, Springfield, gave its name to one of the most fa-

SEE INDUSTRY A6

ELECTION 2024

Biden: 'No indication of serious condition'

President speaks of debate as 'bad episode' in interview; Healey urges him to evaluate prospects

By COLLEEN LONG and SEUNG MIN KIM
Associated Press



President Joe Biden speaks at a rally Friday at Sherman Middle School in Madison, Wis.

MADISON, Wis. — President Joe Biden, fighting to save his endangered reelection effort Friday, said his disastrous debate performance last week was a "bad episode" and there were "no indications of any serious condition" in a highly anticipated ABC interview that was seen as a significant test on his fitness to run for office.

"I didn't listen to my instincts in terms of preparing," Biden told ABC's George Stephanopoulos in an excerpt that aired Friday evening.

Yet Biden's rigorous efforts to correct course from his debate performance were not yet quelling internal party frustrations, with one influential Democratic senator working on a nascent push that would encourage the president to exit the race and Democrats quietly chatting about where they would go next if the president drops out — or what it would mean if he stays in.

At least three House Democrats have called for Biden to step down as the nominee, with Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., joining Texas Rep. Lloyd Doggett and Arizona Rep. Raúl Gri-

jalva in pushing for an alternative.

While not going that far, Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey said in a carefully worded statement Friday that Biden now has a decision to make on "the best way forward."

"Over the coming days, I urge him to listen to the American people and carefully evaluate whether he remains our best hope to defeat Donald Trump," Healey said.

Still, in Wisconsin, Biden was focused on proving his capacity to remain as president. When asked whether he would halt his campaign, he said told reporters he was "completely ruling that out" and said he is "positive" he could serve for another four years. At a rally in front of hundreds of supporters he acknowledged his subpar debate performance but insisted: "I am running, and I'm going to win again."

"I beat Donald Trump," a forceful Biden said, as the crowd gathered in a local middle school cheered and waved campaign signs. "I will beat him again."

Biden, using a teleprompter, attacked his presumptive Republican challenger almost immediately, laying into Trump by pointing out that the former president once said that "George Washington's army won the revolution by taking control of the airports from the British."

As the crowd laughed, Biden continued, "Talk about me misspeaking."

In his speech, Biden tried to flip the questions swirling about his age, asking the crowd rhetorically whether he was "too old" to have passed gun legislation, created jobs and helped ease student loan debt — while suggesting he'd do more in a second presidential term.

The rally preceded an interview that could be a watershed moment for Biden, who is under pressure to bow out of the campaign after his disastrous debate performance against Republican Donald Trump ignited concern that the 81-year-old Democrat is not up for the job for another four years.

There was broad agreement that Biden could not afford to have another "bad day," which is how he wrote off his debate flop. It was not clear even a so-so performance would be enough to satisfy concerns about his fitness to serve.

While private angst among Democratic lawmakers, donors and strategists is running deep after Biden's damaging debate performance, most in the party have held public fire as they wait to see if the president can restore some confidence with his weekend travel schedule and his handling of the Stephanopoulos interview, airing in full Friday night.

To that end, Sen. Mark Warner reached out to fellow senators throughout this week to discuss whether to ask Biden to exit the race, according to three people familiar with the effort who requested anonymity to talk about private conversations.

The Virginia Democrat's moves are notable given his role as chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee and his reputation as a lawmaker who has supported Biden and developed working relationships with colleagues in both parties. Warner's effort was first reported by The Washington Post.

The strategy remains fluid. One of the people with knowledge of Warner's effort said there are enough Senate Democrats concerned enough about Biden's capacity to run for reelection to take some sort of action, although there was yet no consensus on what that plan would be.

There were a few signs of discontent at Biden's campaign rally Friday, with one supporter onstage waving a sign that read "Pass the torch Joe" as the president came out.

Church invests in nonprofit

CHURCH FROM A1

eral decades. The recent \$500,000 investment has its origins in a survey of congregants done in 2019 to gauge their preference on what causes the church could better support in the community. The congregation indicated that supporting affordable housing was an area of strong interest.

Though the new investment is not the entirety of the church's existing portfolio, McSherry said it represented a "significant portion" of the church's funds.

"There's lots of causes and I wish we could give to all of them," McSherry said. "Nothing gets better until there's more [housing] inventory."

The church's investment committee subsequently looked for an affordable housing partner to invest in. They eventually settled on Way Finders, after realizing that it had its own fund that was open to outside investors.

The \$500,000 goes into Way Finders' Development Capital Fund, used on spending for pre-development plans such as hiring architects to draw up designs and lawyers to go over land-use arrangements.

"Our pre-development fund is vital because it covers the large expenses tied to all the work needed before we put a shovel in the dirt," said Way Finders CEO Keith Fairey in a statement. "This includes architect fees, site preparation, permitting and due diligence."

Way Finders currently has seven affordable housing development projects underway in communities across the Pioneer Valley and western Massachusetts, located in Amherst, South Hadley, Ludlow, Springfield and Agawam. In Northampton the organization manages several affordable housing properties, such as Live 155 and the Lumber Yard, both located on Pleasant Street.

In addition to the investment, Edwards Church also has previously provided grants to Manna Soup Kitchen, the Northampton Survival Center, and various interfaith charitable organizations. It also hosts an annual Thanksgiving dinner organized by Manna volunteers, often serving those struggling with homelessness or food insecurity.

"I wish we could do more," McSherry said. "If any other affordable housing groups are looking for partners, give us a call."

Alexander MacDougall can be reached at amac-dougall@gazettenet.com.

Energy bill fuels fears about protecting natural resources

ENERGY FROM A1

The Senate adopted a Comerford amendment to require the Department of Energy Resources to initiate a process to make recommendations for how Massachusetts can get more canopies built across the state.

Comerford said the Senate listened attentively, especially to the small communities in western Massachusetts that need protection from large projects, including Wendell, where an industrial-size energy storage system is proposed for an 11-acre parcel.

"Western Massachusetts wants a green revolution," Comerford said. "We just want to make sure it's equitable and honors the natural and working lands."

Still, the Senate bill reflects the divide when it comes to permitting and siting big green energy projects and meeting the state's commitment of getting to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

DeChiara said both supporters of the bill and those who are wary of its provisions are supportive of green energy. However, proponents see the climate emergency as so imminent that it is critical to get as much solar, offshore wind and other green energy projects done as quickly as possible, even at the cost of forests, fields and farms. Meanwhile, doubters who support decarbonization efforts to confront the climate emergency insist that decisions should consider potential impacts to natural resources, and that priority should be given to siting projects on land that's already developed.

In Shutesbury, where a 30-acre site has already become a solar field, five

additional arrays on 190 acres are being proposed by PureSky Energy solar company, making it potentially the largest project in the state.

According to DeChiara, one shortfall in the legislation is that it relies solely on the private sector to meet the state's ambitious goals, rather than providing financial incentives and actual money for people to put solar at their homes. "So much of what is being discussed is private sector deployment," DeChiara said.

Another concern is that project reviews would be limited to one year for smaller projects, with the consolidated permit to be issued, or denied, by the municipality. But for larger projects, 24 megawatt and over for solar and wind and 100 megawatt and over for batteries, a consolidated permit decision would be made within 15 months by the state's Energy Facilities Siting Board.

"Having the threshold would invite bigger-than-reasonable projects," DeChiara said. "Developers would rather deal with the state than regular people, who can be pesky."

But the House version, developed under Rep. Jeffrey Roy of Franklin, doesn't have any thresholds on size, which DeChiara characterizes as "ridiculous and really scary."

Rep. Aaron Saunders of Ludlow, whose district includes Shutesbury, Pelham and Wendell, said he is prepared to advocate for local interests when clean energy legislation is discussed.

"Once this bill is in front of the House, I will be able to provide further insight into the concerns surrounding local control and conservation in the context of what is included in the Sen-

ate's final draft of the legislation," Saunders said.

Judith Eiseeman, who chairs the Pelham Planning Board, has similar concerns to DeChiara about the legislation.

"Protecting natural resources with high biodiversity valuable to the region and the state should be a primary goal, not doing this as fast and cheaply as possible," Eiseeman wrote in an email.

Eiseeman pointed to the Department of Energy Resources's Technical Potential of Solar report and said that to meet climate goals, the state should begin by using only sites deemed "highly suitable" for clean-energy projects.

"There is no benefit to be gained in the long term by damaging forests that our rural communities have been protecting for years to maintain wildlife corridors, surface and ground water supply and other ecosystem benefits like carbon sequestration and habitat," Eiseeman said. "Recognition of the efforts of smaller communities to limit ecological damage in order to protect health and public welfare is overdue."

DeChiara, too, would like to see the solar siting map from 2023 used.

"If there is a gap and no site suitability guidance, the status quo will continue whereby developers choose where they want to place large scale solar and energy storage rather than the communities or the state," DeChiara said.

Though western Massachusetts communities are concerned about siting, a leader of the Senate bill was Sen. Michael Barrett, D-Lexington, who told Statehouse News Service that decarbonization of buildings and vehicles

is what gets his constituents excited.

"The energy grid is like that. It absolutely needs updating, absolutely needs renewing every 30 years. But it's pretty boring stuff," Barrett said.

But as much as 150,000 acres of undeveloped land could be lost to meet state renewable energy goals, according to projections from MassAudubon, which states forested land is about 3 million acres, or 60% of the state's land mass. On average, one acre of forested land stores 85 tons of carbon, while Massachusetts forests in total sequester around 15% of the state's annual emissions.

"The thing encouraging about the Senate bill is the state is finally acknowledged the sequestration benefits," DeChiara said.

Before the clean energy legislation that emerged, the Senate Committee on Ways and Means already included many of the provisions Comerford advocated for, including requiring the development of a methodology to evaluate whether a site is well suited for hosting clean energy infrastructure, and requiring developers to avoid, minimize or mitigate siting impact and environmental and land use concerns.

Comerford then filed a series of amendments that she said will also benefit constituents, such as creating an Embodied Carbon Coordinating Council within the state's Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance; having a municipal permit timing safety valve so that communities extension in cases where 12 months just isn't enough time; and requiring utilities to consider grid-enhancing technology, such as upgrading cables, to achieve their transmission goals.

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