

Houston County Planning Commission
January 22, 2026

Approved on February 26, 2026 by Chase Munson and Larry Gaustad.

The Houston County Planning Commission met at 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, January 22, 2026. A summary of the meeting follows.

The meeting was called to order by Environmental Services Director Amelia Meiners. Roll call was taken. Members present were Larry Gaustad, Johnathon Glasspoole, Josh Gran, Franklin Hahn, Chase Munson, and Richard Schild. Eric Johnson, County Commissioner, was present. Amelia Meiners and Michelle Burt were present for Environmental Services.

Election of Chairperson for 2026 took place. Larry Gaustad nominated Franklin Hahn for Chairperson. Johnathon Glasspoole seconded. A roll call vote was taken. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Election of Vice Chairperson for 2026 took place. Franklin Hahn nominated Larry Gaustad for Vice Chairperson. Chase Munson seconded. Chairman Hahn declared nominations ceased. A roll call vote was taken. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Election for a Board of Adjustment delegate for 2026 took place. Chase Munson nominated Franklin Hahn. Josh Gran seconded. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Larry Gaustad made a motion to approve the minutes of December 18, 2025. Josh Gran seconded. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Notice of Public Hearing No. 1006 was read for applicants, **OneEnergy Development LLC and AC4 Farms LLC**, 12904 County 12, Caledonia, MN 55921.

The petitioner is requesting a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) to construct a 5 MW ground mounted solar distribution commercial solar project in an Agricultural Protection District (Section 14-14.3, Subdivision 1, Subsection 22) in Caledonia Township.

- Minnesota Statute 394 authorizes counties to carry out planning and zoning activities which is completed through the adoption of two documents. The comprehensive land use plan is the guidance document that acts as a foundation for a community's future decision making by establishing goals, objectives and identifying background information. The zoning ordinance implements those goals and policies through regulations and provides a mechanism for enforcement. The ordinance must be in accordance with the land use plan.
- The most recent Comprehensive Land Use Plan in Houston County was adopted on July 25, 2023, and the Houston County Zoning Ordinance is amended time to time as needed. The last major amendments to the zoning ordinance were completed in 2018 and a couple minor items were amended in 2025.
- Commercial solar energy systems have been a hot topic in Houston County for the past year. A six-month moratorium on projects was approved on December 31, 2024, to allow the County time to review the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and associated ordinances and a six-month extension was adopted on May 27, 2025.
- The concern with the existing ordinance language is that the ordinance ultimately does allow solar energy systems but does not differentiate commercial from accessory or individual use systems and does not require specific performance standards that are typically seen with commercial size proposals. For comparison, consider mineral extraction (Section 27), wind turbines (Section 34), and even land alteration (Section 24). In fact, the same language has been in the ordinance since 1982

and think of how much solar technology has changed since that time. It is even questionable whether a conditional use permit is required since the ordinance also states that solar energy systems are permitted uses within all districts. Commercial systems should not be permitted uses.

- The Comprehensive Land Use Plan does encourage alternative energy systems in the County, but the policy goes further to state, “for personal use, or by individual residences or businesses”. In addition, multiple land use goals and policies cite preserving commercial agriculture and prime agricultural land.
- After working with the Great Plain Institute and considering information gathered by a University of MN Extension project, an ordinance draft and comprehensive plan amendment were reviewed by the Planning Commission on November 20, 2025, resulting in a recommendation of approval to the County Board. The County Board reviewed that proposal on December 2, 2025, but the proposal failed to receive a supermajority of votes, so the amendments failed to pass. The moratorium expired on December 31, 2025.
- **Overall, while the application may be thorough and complete, it’s missing an important item – concurrence with the alternative energies section of our Comprehensive Land Use Plan. The proper way for this to move forward requires an amendment to the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and at that same time staff recommends setting performance standards within the Houston County Zoning Ordinance (HCZO).**
- Below are relevant sections of Minnesota Statutes:

2025 MINNESOTA STATUTES

394.22 DEFINITIONS.

Subd. 9. Comprehensive plan.

"Comprehensive plan" means the policies, statements, goals, and interrelated plans for private and public land and water use, transportation, and community facilities including recommendations for plan execution, documented in texts, ordinances and maps which constitute the guide for the future development of the county or any portion of the county.

394.23 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN.

The board has the power and authority to prepare and adopt by ordinance, a comprehensive plan. A comprehensive plan or plans when adopted by ordinance must be the basis for official controls adopted under the provisions of sections [394.21](#) to [394.37](#). The commissioner of natural resources must provide the natural heritage data from the county biological survey, if available, to each county for use in the comprehensive plan. When adopting or updating the comprehensive plan, the board must, if the data is available to the county, consider natural heritage data resulting from the county biological survey. In a county that is not a greater than 80 percent area, as defined in section [103G.005](#), subdivision 10b, the board must consider adopting goals and objectives that will protect open space and the environment. The board must consider the location and dimensions of airport safety zones in any portion of the county, and of any airport improvements, identified in the airport's most recent approved airport layout plan.

394.231 COMPREHENSIVE PLANS IN GREATER MINNESOTA; OPEN SPACE.

A county adopting or updating a comprehensive plan in a county outside the metropolitan area as defined by section [473.121](#), subdivision 2, and that is not a greater than 80 percent area, as defined in section [103G.005](#), subdivision 10b, shall consider adopting goals and objectives for the preservation of agricultural, forest, wildlife, and open space land, and minimizing development in sensitive shoreland areas. Within three years of updating the comprehensive plan, the county shall consider adopting ordinances as part of the county's official controls that encourage the implementation of the goals and objectives. The county shall consider the following goals and objectives:

(1) minimizing the fragmentation and development of agricultural, forest, wildlife, and open space lands, including consideration of appropriate minimum lot sizes;

(2) minimizing further development in sensitive shoreland areas;

- (3) minimizing development near wildlife management areas, scientific and natural areas, and nature centers;
- (4) encouraging land uses in airport safety zones that are compatible with the safe operation of the airport and the safety of people in the vicinity of the airport;
- (5) identification of areas of preference for higher density, including consideration of existing and necessary water and wastewater services, infrastructure, other services, and to the extent feasible, encouraging full development of areas previously zoned for nonagricultural uses;
- (6) encouraging development close to places of employment, shopping centers, schools, mass transit, and other public and private service centers;
- (7) identification of areas where other developments are appropriate; and
- (8) other goals and objectives a county may identify.

- Below are relevant sections of the Houston County Zoning Ordinance:

HOUSTON COUNTY ZONING ORDINANCE

SECTION 1 – PREAMBLE, TITLE, SHORT TITLE AND PURPOSE

1.4 PURPOSE

The purpose of this Ordinance is to promote the health, safety, and general welfare of the citizens in the unincorporated areas of Houston County and to conserve the resources of the County by adopting the following policies:

Subdivision 9. *To Encourage Solar And Earth-Sheltered Dwellings. To implement policy and standards that conserve energy by allowing solar and earth-sheltered housing.*

SECTION 2 - IMPLEMENTATION

2.6 RELATION TO LAND USE PLAN

It is the policy of the County Board that the enactment, amendment and administration of this Ordinance be accomplished with due consideration of the purposes and objectives of the County Land Use Plan as adopted or approved and amended from time to time by the Board.

SECTION 3 – RULES AND DEFINITIONS

3.6 DEFINITIONS

Conditional Use. *A land use or development as defined by Code that would not be appropriate generally but may be allowed with appropriate restrictions as provided by official controls upon a finding that:*

- *Certain conditions as detailed in the Zoning Ordinance exist.*
- *The use or development conforms to the comprehensive land use plan of the County.*
- *The use or development is compatible with the existing neighborhood.*

Solar Energy System. *A complete design or assembly consisting of a solar energy collector, an energy storage facility (where used), and components for the distribution of transformed energy (to the extent they cannot be used jointly with a conventional energy system).*

SECTION 14 – AGRICULTURAL PROTECTION DISTRICT

14.3 CONDITIONAL USES

Subdivision 1. Conditional Uses. *In the Agricultural Protection District, the following uses may be allowed only after obtaining a Conditional Use Permit in accordance with the provision of this Ordinance.*

- (22) *Solar Energy Systems. Solar energy systems and solar structures.*

SECTION 29 – GENERAL PROVISIONS

29.8 SOLAR ENERGY SYSTEMS AND SOLAR STRUCTURES

Subdivision 1. Permitted by District. *Solar energy systems and solar structures shall be a permitted use in all districts except the flood plain districts provided the system is in compliance with minimum lot requirements and setbacks. Within the flood plain district, solar structures shall be a conditional use.*

Subdivision 2. Setback Exemptions. *Solar energy systems and solar structures may be exempted from setback, height, and lot coverage restrictions in all districts by variance.*

Subdivision 3. Access to Sun Light. *In a residential zone, no owner, occupier, or person in control of property shall allow vegetation or structures to be placed or grow so as to cast a shadow on a solar energy system which is greater than the shadow cast by a hypothetical wall ten (10) feet high located along the boundary line of the property between the hours of 9:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Central Standard Time on December 21 provided, however, this standard shall not apply to vegetation or structures which cast a shadow upon the solar energy system at the time of installation of the system.*

Subdivision 4. Establishment of Right to Sun Light. *As a means of evidencing existing conditions, the owner of a solar energy system may file notarized photographs of the area with the County prior to installation of the system.*

Subdivision 5. Violation Constitutes a Private Nuisance. *Violation of this standard shall constitute a private nuisance and any owner or occupant whose solar energy system is shaded because of such violation, so that performance of the system is impaired, may have in tort for the damages sustained thereby and may have such nuisance abated.*

- Below is the Alternative Energy Section from the Comprehensive Plan (page 32):

Alternative Energy Systems

From the use of cords of wood to heat home when Houston County was organized, to today's use of electricity and natural gas, the technology and methods for the generation of energy has evolved. In 2020, renewable sources of energy (including wind, solar, hydropower, and biomass) generated the largest share of electricity in the state¹. Wind energy now provides most of the state's renewable electricity generation. Wind energy conversion systems of over 40 kilowatts and less than 5,000 kilowatts are permitted under the County's zoning ordinance through a Conditional Use Permit. State law preempts the County from regulating wind energy conversion systems that have a nameplate capacity of 5,000 kilowatts or more.

Over the last twenty years, solar has become an attractive alternative for those interested in generating some potential added income while becoming less reliant on fossil fuels. Solar panels are typically either placed on the roof of an existing building (commonly referred to as 'building mounted'), or are installed as an array on an open area (commonly referred to as 'ground-mounted'). Solar systems are already a permitted use under the county's zoning ordinance. The Minnesota Department of Commerce has collected a vast resource of information for property owners interested in installing solar panels. One such source is the 'MN Solar Suitability Analysis App', which provides location-based information on potential solar generation². A variety of state and federal loans, grants, and tax credits have been created over the last twenty years to incentivize property owners to invest in renewable energy³. Mi Energy Cooperative also has a variety of information for county residents to utilize when considering alternative forms of energy.

Alternative Energy Goals & Policies

Goal

Goal 2.13: Encourage options for alternative energy systems in the County

Policies

Policy 1. Review and explore standards and permitting requirements for alternative energy systems used for personal use, or by individual residences or businesses.

- Site Characteristics:
 - This location has no bluff or slope concerns or shoreland, floodplain or wetland concerns. The area of this parcel shown to be occupied by the solar array consists of soil types 285A, 285B, 401C, and 585C. All are considered prime ag soils.
 - There are dwellings located in every direction. Within a quarter mile there are four dwellings and seven additional if considered within a half mile setback.
 - The airport is approximately a half mile east of this proposal and Staggemeyer Stave is approximately a half mile south, but that exists as a legal, non-conforming use. The project passed initial screening from the FAA without further requirements.

- Caledonia Township, the City of Caledonia, and the 15 closest property owners were notified. There are three public comments included in the packet.

Beth Esser and Braeden DuMond, of OneEnergy Development LLC, Kent Whitcomb, of MiEnergy Cooperative, and Andy and Sheri Allen were present to answer questions. Chairman Hahn asked the applicants if they had anything to add. The applicants presented a slideshow while describing the project. Braeden DuMond provided a few details about OneEnergy Development LLC, the projects they are involved in, and their goals.

Kent Whitcomb explained why MiEnergy Cooperative was looking into this solar project. Whitcomb stated that the number one reason MiEnergy is looking at this project is to stabilize rates. Over the last three years Excel has seen a 20% increase, Alliant has seen a 20% increase, and in our area we have seen an average 3% increase over the past three years. One of the main reasons for this was creating different revenue sources at MiEnergy Cooperative. About 6 years ago, MiEnergy was part of four large-scale projects with OneEnergy Development LLC and the benefits of that are being seen. This helps to keep the rates stable. Eric Johnson asked for clarification on the revenue sources. Kent Whitcomb stated that Dairyland Power Cooperative is who wholesale power is purchased from. They have a policy put in place where we can go out and buy 10% of the energy away from them, we can either generate the energy ourselves or do a power purchase agreement with another company, such as OneEnergy Development LLC. Whitcomb stated that for this project a power purchase agreement would be made with OneEnergy Development LLC for OneEnergy to build the system, generate the power, and MiEnergy would buy the energy from this system. Dairyland Power Cooperative's policy also says 10% can be purchased outside of them but they purchase it back, so MiEnergy negotiates a power purchase agreement price that is lower than what Dairyland Power Cooperative would buy from MiEnergy and that would be considered the revenue. Eric Johnson stated that it would be a revenue source for MiEnergy. Whitcomb stated the second reason is grid resiliency. This is essentially bringing generation to our community on our system. Whitcomb stated that if something were to happen on the grid overall, MiEnergy would have to deal with it. If we can bring generation locally and something happens on the grid, we can isolate ourselves. Essentially, the substation could be disconnected and MiEnergy can operate with the substation generation and keep all the members on the substation online. Whitcomb also stated that MiEnergy will also be looking at the rolling blackouts that have been talked about recently with the transmission line coming through the area. Typically, the highest peaking time on the grid is 2:00pm to 6:00pm during the Summer. Usually, the solar is producing during this time and if we ever got to where we as a utility had to disconnect from the grid a plan is in place. Whitcomb stated MiEnergy would be required to shed 25% of load by rotating substations and looking at how much load is on each substation. If there is a site where essentially 5MW of solar is being produced and the load is less than 25% or there isn't much load on the substation due to the generation, this substation will not be taken offline. Whitcomb stated that the third reason is for the 2040 Carbon Free Mandate set forth by the State of Minnesota and this project helps. Whitcomb stated that the next reason would be economic development, as there will be tax revenue for the County and Township. The State of Minnesota has a solar production tax revenue where they tax the amount of solar produced on the system. Whitcomb stated that with the projected lifespan of the project it is estimated to be \$455,000 split between the County and the Township.

Eric Johnson asked if the lifespan of the project would be 30 years. Whitcomb stated that depending on the condition of the system after 30 years there could be an extension, so these numbers could change. Beth Esser clarified that the lifetime of the lease is 35 years, as they estimated between the 30- and 45-year timeline. Braeden DuMond stated that OneEnergy Development LLC has a warranty on the panels for 30 years, so that is why the lease is for 30 years but there is a 10-year extension built into the lease. At the 30-year mark, if the project were to stay in production, it would be MiEnergy's decision.

Franklin Hahn asked how it is justified with Dairyland Power Cooperative and the small solar systems that are generating energy. Kent Whitcomb stated that any system that is under 40kW, Dairyland Power Cooperative does not handle.

Braeden DuMond explained the process for selecting sites for solar projects. Sheri Allen stated they were contacted because they own land around a substation that is fairly flat. Allen stated that, through the locating process, they learned that with the way solar panels are created it is preferred for the panels to be located on flat land due to the movement of the panels, as they are no longer stationary. Allen stated they were interested in solar for themselves, so they wanted to go down this route. This project provides an opportunity for diversity of income, so the farm can continue to grow. Allen stated they also had to think long term for income for themselves. Allen stated that she wants to keep landowner rights in the forefront of everything and they would like to move forward with this project on their prime land.

Braeden DuMond stated that they like to choose sites within 5 miles of a substation. The closer you can get to a substation the more efficient the energy production and less energy is lost. Therefore, making the project and energy more affordable. DuMond stated that OneEnergy Development LLC is trying to produce this energy at a low price that is suitable for MiEnergy Cooperative's portfolio otherwise they have no reason to pursue these projects. DuMond reiterated Sheri Allen's comment about the land being flat, which is great for solar projects. DuMond stated the flat land not only accommodates the moving of the panels, but we want to minimize the amount of steel used as possible. The more topography a piece of land has the more variation there is in steel piles and steel is expensive which can make a project unaffordable. Braeden DuMond stated that the panels used by OneEnergy Development LLC are bi-facial panels which means they are able to collect sunlight from the top and bottom. This has made panels efficient and viable in the northern part of the United States, especially in the winter as the panels can capture energy off the reflection of the snow. DuMond stated that single axis tracking is used. Essentially, the panels will sit on a north-south oriented torque tube and throughout the day the panels will rotate starting in the east, tracking the sun throughout the day, and ending in the west. DuMond stated that the panels are all mounted on steel racking and piles that are driven 8-15 feet into the ground depending on the soil type. An in-depth soil analysis is completed when constructing these project sites to ensure the steel piles are adequate for the type of soil, making the projects well secure. DuMond explained that some of the electrical components that will be seen on the site are invertors and transformers. DuMond stated that the fencing around these types of projects consists of wood posts and woven wire that allows the passage of smaller wildlife but keeps the bigger wildlife species out. Eric Johnson asked how tall the fence would be. Braeden DuMond stated that the fence is 8 feet tall which is a requirement of the National Electric Code if barb wire is not being used. DuMond stated that this project is for 5MW on 24 acres that is estimated to produce 10 million kW hours per year which is equivalent to the electricity needs of over 1,000 homes. The site will connect to MiEnergy Cooperative's three-phase distribution lines and the surrounding land will continue to be farmed. There is plan for vegetative screening to minimize the visual impact to the neighbors located to the south of the project.

Kent Whitcome stated that MiEnergy Cooperative will be building a new circuit for the project. This circuit will be three-phase and placed underground travelling from the substation to the site.

Eric Johnson asked why this spot was chosen over the land to the north. Beth Esser stated that when they met with Andy and Sheri Allen and Kent Whitcomb they wanted to be as close to the substation as possible but there were already plans for that area of the parcel that is next to the highway. Sheri Allen stated that they have future plans of doing grain storage. Andy Allen stated that if it was up to him the project would be across the road on land that is less prime land but the process is what it is. Ideally, they wanted to use this location to be the least invasive for the neighbors. Sheri Allen stated that the site was not chosen by them as there are architects that help determine the location. Beth Esser stated that their engineers confirmed that the site to the south would not work as there is too much slope, potential shading of panels, and too much grading which would then become unaffordable for what MiEnergy Cooperative is looking for. Eric Johnson asked about the reference to grading and if grading is required to install the poles. Beth Esser stated that they try to minimize the amount of grading as much as possible by choosing flat sites. Esser stated that these projects accommodate some fluctuation in topography. The tracking system allows for a little bit of undulation but there will be some grading to accommodate that. When grading is done the topsoil is removed and replaced as it is important to have vegetation be established.

Sheri Allen stated that the goal of the project is to graze with agrivoltaics. Allen stated that they have been working with Ryan Herman's company to arrange grazing with his sheep. Allen stated that they are also working with Shooting Star Native Seeds in Spring Grove for utilizing the remaining perimeter for hand harvested seed and using it as an education plot. Andy Allen stated that it has been brought up previously that this is prime farmland but he reiterated that it is still prime farmland. Allen stated that it is not like something is being done to destroy every square inch of the 24 acres and he does not want this site to be lost. Allen stated that this is about maintaining their farm and it will still be utilized in an agricultural way. Sheri Allen stated that the definition of agrivoltaics is dual purpose. It is running the solar as well as harvesting plants or animals under the solar, so the land would stay agricultural use and zoning.

Eric Johnson asked if they had any concern with what the solar could do to the farmland in the span of 30 years. Sheri Allen feels the soil will be better. Johnson referenced an article that was published in Michigan for potato harvesting under solar arrays and they are being told that because of shards of metal and glass getting into the soil that some potato processing companies will not accept these potatoes. Beth Esser read a statement provided by Ryan Herman. Esser stated that OneEnergy Development LLC works with researchers that do soil studies on several of their solar projects. This research is underway but nothing negative has been heard about soil under the panels and she is unsure where shards of glass or metal would come from. The panels are tempered glass and if there is damage to a panel they are replaced. Esser stated that they only get paid if solar is produced, so the projects are monitored and they are alerted right away if something is not producing.

Eric Johnson asked if there has ever been discussion in the solar industry for leaching metals from the panels. Beth Esser stated that they have reports from the solar producers that they are required to test for leaching where they grind up the panel and submerge into a solution. Nothing is detected in terms of leaching and the panels are considered non-hazardous by the EPA.

Franklin Hahn asked if there was a company or someone that could test the soil at the project sites to determine if there is leaching. Beth Esser stated that there are researchers that test the soil under the panels but she is unsure of any company that would do this. Esser stated that the Minnesota Department of Public Health and a consultant that does wetland delineations and Phase 1 Environmental Assessments were collaborating on research for targeting Drinking Water Supply Management Areas in Minnesota where they would replace row crops with solar because they knew it would reduce the nitrate levels in the soil. Esser stated that the studies that she is aware of and the research and interest in putting solar on land have been about resting the soil from traditional row crops and revitalizing it with the prairie and the grazing pasture with the pollinator prairie that they plant.

Braeden DuMond went over the frequently asked questions with solar projects.

Josh Gran asked what happens if a solar panel gets damaged. Braeden DuMond stated that the panels are pretty resilient as they are tempered glass which is similar to a windshield on a vehicle. They do not shatter but they may splinter but the components of the panel remain inside. DuMond stated that, when under stress, the panels are able to orient themselves to reduce stress. For example, if hail is coming down, the panels can rotate to cause the impact to be from an angle instead of straight on. Josh Gran asked how the panels know how to do this. Braeden DuMond stated that the panels have weight sensors, so they would do the same thing for snow piled up. DuMond stated that majority of damage to a panel happens during delivery. OneEnergy Development LLC works with a couple of certified electronics recyclers. They are able to recover 98% of the panel materials as glass and aluminum. Any copper and silver have some salvage value with the panel's life.

Braeden DuMond stated that there is a lot of concern with the glare from the panels but there are panels that have an antireflective coating. When it comes to noise, DuMond stated that he has never heard any sound from the transformer when at the fenceline. The transformer and inverter make a sound similar to

a household refrigerator. Sheri Allen stated that OneEnergy Renewables LLC has to follow guidelines, so the sound that is coming from the center of the solar project cannot be heard past the fenceline.

Chase Munson asked if there were any requirements for measuring the noise since it may be louder on sunny days. Beth Esser stated that measurement is planned for times with the highest production output. Munson asked if measurements were taken yearly or if they were a requirement. Esser stated that there are noise studies completed but it is not routinely done. DuMond stated that there are some sites that have a noise study set as a requirement.

Braeden DuMond stated that wildlife reviews have been completed through the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Minnesota DNR. It has been found that no critical habitat or species should be impacted by this project. DuMond stated their solar sites do not generate any sort of odors.

Braeden DuMond explained that postconstruction, the solar sites do not see a lot of traffic. There is an estimated one to two trucks per month for operations and maintenance but it is most likely closer to one truck. During construction of the project, it is expected to see 60 delivery trucks containing the panels and other assembly materials and 200 dump trucks to build the driveway. Braeden DuMond listed few of the other permits that are obtained for solar projects, which are MNPCA, stormwater, erosion, building, mechanical, and electrical permits.

Braeden DuMond stated that it is built into the lease that within one year of the project no longer producing energy, OneEnergy Renewables LLC is required to remove the system. DuMond stated that there is a decommissioning plan in place in which all components will be removed from the site. The nature of these sites makes decommissioning and removal simple as it is steel piles driven into the ground. DuMond stated that the project owner is responsible for decommissioning, in this case OneEnergy Renewables LLC would be the owner. Josh Gran asked what would happen to the lease if OneEnergy Renewables LLC were to go out of business. Braeden DuMond stated that the lease and project would be for sale and someone else would assume the legal requirement with the lease. Beth Esser stated that all their projects are committed to by a lease and if the County or Township would like to require an additional form of security on the project the company will work with them on this request. Esser stated that they have routinely gotten estimates from third party engineers on the cost to remove versus the salvage value of the materials. At year five of the project, the cost to remove is extremely in favor of the salvage value. The engineers always estimate that the salvage value will be higher than the cost to remove through at least year 15 of the project.

Eric Johnson asked if OneEnergy Renewables LLC would put up a bond for the project. Beth Esser stated that a bond can be discussed as a condition to the permit.

Braeden DuMond stated that the benefit for this project is that the power is produced locally and consumed locally, which makes the electricity affordable. Therefore, it is affordable for MiEnergy Cooperative. Josh Gran asked for clarification on the locality of the energy being local for MiEnergy, Houston County, or the Caledonia Area. Kent Whitcomb stated that majority of the electricity will get consumed up in the Caledonia substation. There will be times where it does factory on transmission, so it will branch out like a network to the other transmissions in Spring Grove, City of Caledonia, Eitzen, and other cities within MiEnergy Cooperative's jurisdiction.

Braeden DuMond stated that these solar projects bring in jobs. OneEnergy Renewables LLC works with solar workforce development programs throughout the Midwest that bring apprentices. Solar installers are one of the fastest growing jobs in the United States. Josh Gran asked when projects like this take place like the breakdown and construction how long are people on site. Braeden DuMond stated that this is not an extended multi-year job but it can be if workers are travelling to many different sites. DuMond stated that these projects take about four to six months depending on various factors such as weather or other construction issues that may be faced. Beth Esser stated that they work with Hunt Electric on many solar

projects and it has been expressed how many apprentices they have that are not solely doing solar but they go on to electrician jobs.

Braeden DuMond requested that the Planning Commission approve the Conditional Use Permit. DuMond stated that they believe with the incorporation of agriculture on site that will be continued through the life of the project and that it does fit in with the values of Houston County. DuMond and his colleagues believe that this project fits into the Houston County's Zoning Ordinance and is allowable with a Conditional Use Permit within the Agricultural Protection District.

Environmental Services Director Amelia Meiners had a couple of comments to clarify a few questions. Meiners stated that some of this is for the benefit of the public in attendance that may not have read the board packet. Meiners explained the review process of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan in 2022 to 2023. The Comprehensive Land Use Plan is a high-level document that provides both residents and the Board a guide for future growth and development. Meiners stated that Minnesota Statute dictates that Comprehensive Land Use Plans can be done by counties as an area outside of metro to have the ability to set goals and objectives that preserve agriculture, forest, wildlife, and open space and minimize development in certain areas such as shoreland. This is reflected in our Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Meiners wanted to point out that the previous Comprehensive Land Use Plan did not address anything with alternative energy resources. Meiners stated that when TKDA came in and we started looking at things, they had asked what was seen for solar permitting in Houston County. Meiners feels that since her time with Houston County there has been an increase in looking at solar as an accessory use to a dwelling and there are a couple ag building that currently utilize solar. Meiners stated that there is no commercial solar in Houston County as of now. When solar was being discussed for the Comprehensive Land Use Plan, commercial solar was not reflected because it was not a current need in Houston County. Moving forward to the end of 2024, Meiners stated she was approached by Beth Esser of OneEnergy Renewables LLC and one other solar company who were both looking into commercial solar in the area. As things got more serious with this project and looking at what our Zoning Ordinance and Comprehensive Land Use Plan requirements were, Meiners stated that she had brought up concerns with inconsistencies not only with language in the Ordinance but also between the Ordinance and the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. This was the reason behind the moratorium in the first place. Meiners stated that the Zoning Ordinance is the regulatory document in which we base our decisions on. The Zoning Ordinance puts forth performance standards, dictates the zoning districts and what kinds of uses are allowed in each district, and it provides the Zoning Department to permit projects and enforce if need be. Meiners stated that as far as solar energy systems our Ordinance has had the same language since 1982. The Ordinance is very broad and states "A complete design or assembly consisting of a solar energy collector, an energy storage facility (where used), and components for distribution of transformed energy" which could be a panel on the roof of your house or commercial solar. Meiners stated this is why we are here today because she feels there was nothing in our Ordinance that told her that we do not allow commercial solar and this is a concern. Meiners stated that she is also concerned that the Ordinance states that solar is a permitted use in all districts and a Conditional Use in the Agricultural Protection District. Meiners stated that commercial solar should not be a permitted use and with doing the research that had been done to propose a solar ordinance none of the referenced Ordinances from neighboring counties and counties across Minnesota have commercial solar as a permitted use. Meiners stated that she appreciates that OneEnergy Renewables LLC was trying to accommodate the typical requirements and is willing to go through the Conditional Use process. With all this being said, Meiners stated the conflicting language between the Zoning Ordinance and the Comprehensive Land Use Plan is what drove the discussion behind the moratorium and the board, at that time, enacting the moratorium on December 31, 2024. Meiners stated that majority of 2025 we were looking at putting an ordinance in place for commercial solar and clarifying items for residential use. A proposed ordinance was drafted. The Planning Commission held public hearings in May, October, and November that utilized input from a project that the University of Minnesota did and we took input from the Great Plains Institute which is an organization that assists local government units. This was primarily to draft the language regarding the balance of prime agricultural use and that was by instituting agrivoltaics which was presented for this project. Meiners stated that the proposed ordinance was never approved and the moratorium has since ended. Meiners stated that we sit here today, solar energy systems are allowed. It is that simple, but it does

not define a maximum, setbacks, etc. Meiners stated that the Planning Commission is tasked with looking at the project in conjunction with the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Meiners mentioned section 2.6 of the Zoning Ordinance which is also referenced in Finding 1. Meiners stated that there is a way to allow commercial solar and we were attempting to get there but did not by the end of the moratorium. Meiners stated that this is not the right way. Meiners stated that her concern is that by allowing this the Board would be invalidating the Comprehensive Land Use Plan which leaves the Zoning Department looking like we have no credibility this is why she recommended denial for this proposal. Meiners thanked the applicants for putting together a comprehensive proposal that was intended to meet most or all of the requirements of the drafted ordinance.

Josh Gran asked Amelia Meiners if she could clarify which part of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan that specifically says no to solar. Meiners stated that the overall goal encourages options for alternative energy systems but in her opinion, the policy that was put in place states that we should “explore standards and permitting requirements for alternative energy systems used for personal use, or by individual residences or businesses.” Meiners stated that this was the only policy that was put in place because it was the only solar Houston County had experienced until this point. Meiners clarified that in the proposed amendments was to add a policy that would accommodate distribution level alternative energy systems not strictly solar. Gran stated that the Comprehensive Land Use Plan encourages alternative energy expiration. Meiners stated that this was correct but at a small scale. Gran asked which part of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan negates nonpersonal use. Eric Johnson stated that commercial use is not addressed in the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Gran stated that commercial is not addressed but it is also not discouraging, so it would not necessarily be a no it would just be up for interpretation. Johnson stated that the Comprehensive Land Use Plan has to be looked at as a whole.

Eric Johnson stated that our goal was to protect prime ag land in Houston County for agricultural production and this has been our number one goal throughout the pages of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Johnson stated that if you take that along with the scenic, wide-open spaces in the area that’s where we have an issue with the Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

General discussion was held by the Board regarding the proposed site and the Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

Chairman Hahn asked if there was any public comment.

Clint Von Arx, local landowner in Houston County, stated that he was approaching the Board as a member of the ag community and a supporter of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Von Arx asked for this permit and the ones to follow be denied as they affect the moral compass of this Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Von Arx stated that his issue has never been with renewable energy, just with it occupying productive ag lands. Von Arx stated that he has heard the argument that this is our land and we can do what we want and he agrees with this to an extent but without rules and regulations that could lead to a slippery slope. Von Arx asked the Board to consider the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Von Arx stated that pasture is one thing but littering it with panels is another. Von Arx stated that he can see both sides of the proposal and has had a lot of conflict about this project but he feels that this is not what we want to look back on in five to ten years from now. Some think that this will be good for the community but Von Arx disagrees. Von Arx feels that we need to think about the next generation and not the financial gain of the generation that is here now.

Kelly Meyer, neighboring property owner, stated that she could see both sides and believes that people should have the right to do what they want with their land up to a point where it can affect the surrounding community and the neighboring properties. Meyer stated that she respects the landowners, OneEnergy Renewables LLC, MiEnergy Cooperative, and their presentation but she has a few concerns. Meyer stated that she has been a realtor in the area for almost 20 years and she works with all sorts of buyers that either live here or are wanting to live here. They come to Houston County because we have such a beautiful area, great farmland, the views, and it is a nice rural community. Meyer commented on a previous

comment that was made regarding property values as she feels property values will be impacted. Meyer stated that she has talked to people over the years since solar farms have come into play and many people do not want to live near a solar farm. Meyer stated that she has not listed a property next to a solar farm but she has been talking with various people and it is a concern for them. Meyer stated that she does not know the answer for clean energy in the future but she feels there has to be land that is not prime farmland that it can be located on. Meyer feels there is not enough long-term research that has been done on the impacts on health, wildlife, and our soils. Meyer stated that due to having cancer a few years ago she really got into health and what is in our environment. Meyer stated that this is a huge concern for her and should be a concern for the community. Meyer stated that she looked over the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and feels the goal that she researched is that prime land is important to keep as we cannot make more.

Mark Klinski, Union Township, responded to the comment about health concerns and feels that the fungicide, insecticide, and synthetic fertilizers that get put on ag ground is more detrimental than solar panels. Klinski stated that the noise concern that was brought up is not an issue. Klinski feels it is a win-win proposal with the agrivoltaics having the sheep graze underneath the solar. Klinski stated that the land is still productive and ag land with the sheep underneath even though it has solar panels on it. Klinski feels the panels look good. Klinski stated that this Country does not need any more corn or beans but it does need clean electricity.

Allison Wagner, Houston County and City of Caledonia resident, thanked the Planning Commission for their service and acknowledged that they do not always have an easy job. Wagner stated that she is there in support of Amelia and the Zoning Department's recommendation to deny the Conditional Use Permit as the proposal does not conform to the County's land use plan. Wagner stated that the Zoning Department was doing their job and did the right thing based on the current rules when they made this recommendation. Wagner stated that it is the job of the Planning Commission to follow the current guidelines. Wagner stated that the only way this project can move forward is if the Comprehensive Land Use Plan were to be amended. Wagner stated that regardless of how anyone in the room feels about commercial solar, it is the Planning Commission and County's job to make decisions based on the current Comprehensive Land Use Plan and Ordinances as they stand at this moment. Wagner stated that she loves Houston County and feels that it is very important that the County follow the proper procedures and follow the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and Ordinances when looking at each and every application. Wagner stated that the overarching theme in the Comprehensive Land Use Plan is appreciation for the County's beauty and our wide-open spaces.

Chairman Hahn asked that the Findings be read if there were no additional comments or questions.

Section 11.05 of the Houston County Zoning Ordinance requires the following:

Subdivision 1. Findings. The Planning Commission shall not recommend a conditional use permit unless they find the following:

1. That the proposed use conforms to the County Land Use Plan.

Staff Analysis: No, Section 2.6 of the Zoning Ordinance requires that the administration of the Ordinance be accomplished with due consideration of the purposes and objectives of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. The Land Use Plan policy for alternative energy goals states, "review and explore standards and permitting requirements for alternative energy systems used for personal use, or by individual residences or businesses". This proposal is not consistent with the Plan.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad		X	Agrees with staff analysis as proposal is not consistent with our Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Throughout this last year he has visited with residents of Houston County, other

			counties, and a solar installer.
Johnathon Glasspoole		X	Agrees with staff analysis. Feels it should have been taken care of at the Board of Commissioner level.
Josh Gran	X		Feels this statement is essentially saying that because the Comprehensive Land Use Plan only states that it is for personal use for residents or businesses. It is not in there to stop commercial solar, it was never included which does not mean it is not allowed.
Franklin Hahn		X	It is a tough job to sit on these Boards and we have a Zoning Ordinance and a Comprehensive Land Use Plan. If we do not follow our Zoning Ordinance and our Comprehensive Land Use Plan, cannot ignore it for one month and discipline someone else the next. We tried to make changes and amendments and it was voted down.
Eric Johnson		X	Agrees with staff analysis. Comprehensive Land Use Plan would need to be amended to consider this permit and we also need a Zoning Ordinance that addresses this permit and commercial solar. Quoted a statement that was made at a Planning Commission meeting for the City of Caledonia that says, “changes should be applied with the purpose of overall growth, positive movement forward, and for the entire community of taxpayers not the benefit of individual gain or personal objectives”.
Chase Munson		X	Agrees with staff analysis. Comprehensive Land Use Plan would have to be amended in order to allow proposal with an Ordinance.
Richard Schild	X		Feels it is still ag land and feels that this would qualify under businesses as stated in the Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

2. That the applicant demonstrates a need for the proposed use.

Staff Analysis: MiEnergy Cooperative has identified the Caledonia substation as one with the capacity to handle solar generation and it’s been cited that solar energy may help minimize blackout effects experienced during times of high demand. Minnesota has required a certain degree of energy production to be from renewables, and this project will help MiEnergy work towards that goal.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		Emphasized “may help”.
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		Understands that MiEnergy is trying to meet standards that are set.
Josh Gran	X		Need to produce more energy.
Franklin Hahn	X		May or may not help minimize blackout effects because we are only guessing that it is going to and we have been working towards the goals of solar with these smaller systems.
Eric Johnson		X	Does not feel a need is demonstrated for the proposed use since blackout effects have not been experienced.
Chase Munson	X		Growing demand for power.
Richard Schild	X		Always need help generating electricity.

3. That the proposed use will not degrade the water quality of the County.

Staff Analysis: Removing ground out of row crop production and replacing that with perennial vegetation will likely build soil health that will ultimately promote water quality. The petitioner identified in the application that panels are made of non-toxic materials (aluminum frame, tempered glass, copper wiring and silica sand) and that any damage to the panel will remain within the closed frame with no concern of leaching.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad		X	Project is over 1-acre and there has to be a stormwater permit established to address drainage concerns.
Johnathon Glasspoole		X	Not sure if water quality could be impacted.
Josh Gran	X		Based on information the applicants have provided
Franklin Hahn		X	Unsure of the difference between silica sand and frac sand.
Eric Johnson		X	Research in leaching effects of solar panels and the fact that human consumption companies such as potato farms and other crops have a concern with leaching.
Chase Munson		X	Feels not much research to backup for water quality. Clarified that it is preferred for solar projects not to be placed in karst areas.
Richard Schild	X		Perennials will help with water quality. Never saw any damage with roof-mounted solar arrays he has had in the past.

4. That the proposed use will not adversely increase the quantity of water runoff.

Staff Analysis: Since this project is over one-acre in size a construction stormwater permit is required which will address drainage concerns. After the construction phase, vegetation will be established that will also aid in infiltration and the stormwater basin will remain.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad		X	25-acres are being taken for this project. Feels the study needs to be completed for the stormwater permit.
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		Shouldn't be more runoff.
Josh Gran	X		Feels that it would be hard for any project to ever pass this analysis if the stormwater study was required before getting the permit.
Franklin Hahn	X		
Eric Johnson		X	Can't agree without knowing what the requirements will be for the stormwater permit.
Chase Munson	X		Vegetative cover.
Richard Schild	X		Stormwater permit will address any concerns

5. That soil conditions are adequate to accommodate the proposed use.

Staff Analysis: The applicant identifies that the silt loam soil type found at this location is consistent with soil types found at many existing solar projects but plans to complete additional geotechnical analysis prior to construction. Silt loams are adequate for site development.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		Silt loam found on the site.
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran	X		

Franklin Hahn	X		There are no existing solar projects in Houston County.
Eric Johnson	X		Unfortunately, it is silt loam soil which is prime farmland.
Chase Munson	X		Silt loam.
Richard Schild	X		Silt loam is prime.

6. That potential pollution hazards have been addressed and that standards have been met.

Staff Analysis: The applicant maintains that there are no pollution hazards associated with this proposal.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad		X	Does not think standards have been met.
Johnathon Glasspoole		X	Unsure if there would be any pollution hazards.
Josh Gran	X		
Franklin Hahn		X	Doesn't feel enough is known for what it is going to do to the soil.
Eric Johnson		X	Can't take the applicants word that there are no pollution hazards after his research on leaching.
Chase Munson	X		
Richard Schild	X		

7. That adequate utilities, access roads, drainage and other necessary facilities have been or are being provided.

Staff Analysis: A new driveway will be constructed off South Prairie Drive and connection to the substation is necessary, otherwise no additional utilities are required for this proposal.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		Feels driveway has been addressed.
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran	X		
Franklin Hahn	X		Township approval is needed to ensure guidelines are being followed.
Eric Johnson	X		With Township approval.
Chase Munson	X		Mentioned and shown in drawings.
Richard Schild	X		There is only going to be one driveway.

8. That adequate measures have been or will be taken to provide sufficient off-street parking and loading space to serve the proposed use.

Staff Analysis: The applicant has identified that parking areas for construction staff are included in the design of the staging area as seen on the site plan. After construction only one vehicle per month is expected for maintenance of the site.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran	X		
Franklin Hahn	X		
Eric Johnson	X		
Chase Munson	X		
Richard Schild	X		

9. That facilities are provided to eliminate any traffic congestion or traffic hazard which may result from the proposed use.

Staff Analysis: Parking for construction workers and deliveries was considered within the staging area of the site plan. After construction the application identifies that only one vehicle is anticipated per month.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran	X		
Franklin Hahn	X		
Eric Johnson	X		
Chase Munson	X		
Richard Schild	X		

10. That the Conditional Use will not be injurious to the use and enjoyment of other property in the immediate vicinity for the purposes already permitted.

Staff Analysis: The primary use of adjacent property, outside of agriculture is residential, with eleven dwellings within a half mile. Vegetative screening is included in the site plan for the south portion of the project, and the applicant identifies solar as a silent neighbor with no odor or light pollution and no noise beyond the perimeter of the project. The proposal has passed initial screening by the FAA without further requirements.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad		X	Agreed with statements made by Franklin Hahn and Eric Johnson.
Johnathon Glasspoole		X	Unsure what the term injurious would be impacting aside from the neighbors.
Josh Gran	X		
Franklin Hahn		X	Concerned it will devalue the neighboring property.
Eric Johnson		X	Aesthetics and disturbance to the neighbors.
Chase Munson		X	Landscape.
Richard Schild	X		Until the screening is up some people may not like it but once up it will be okay.

11. That the establishment of the Conditional Use will not impede the normal and orderly development and improvement of surrounding vacant property for predominant uses in the area.

Staff Analysis: This proposal will not impede surrounding agricultural uses and there is currently no setback requirement between solar arrays and other uses so no impact to orderly development is anticipated.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad		X	Hurt surrounding area for agriculture uses or sales of land in the area.
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		Talking about surrounding vacant property.
Josh Gran	X		Doesn't impede other uses in the area.
Franklin Hahn	X		
Eric Johnson		X	Feels it will impede orderly development in the agriculture

			district. Concerned that there are no setback requirements.
Chase Munson		X	Setbacks should be addressed.
Richard Schild	X		

12. That adequate measures have been or will be taken to prevent or control offensive odor, fumes, dust, noise and vibration, so that none of these will constitute a nuisance, and to control lighted signs and other lights in such a manner that no disturbance to neighboring properties will result.

Staff Analysis: The applicant identifies that there will be no audible noise beyond the project perimeter, nor any lights or odor associated with the project. Cover crops will be used prior to construction to minimize dust and erosion and after construction vegetation will be established.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		Adequate measures are being taken.
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran	X		
Franklin Hahn		X	Knows that once digging of the cover crops starts they will be gone, so there will be dust and erosion.
Eric Johnson	X		
Chase Munson	X		
Richard Schild	X		

13. That the density of any proposed residential development is not greater than the density of the surrounding neighborhood or not greater than the density indicated by the applicable Zoning District.

Staff Analysis: N/A

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran	X		
Franklin Hahn	X		
Eric Johnson	X		
Chase Munson	X		
Richard Schild	X		

14. That the intensity of any proposed commercial or industrial development is not greater than the intensity of the surrounding uses or not greater than the intensity characteristic of the applicable Zoning District.

Staff Analysis: There is an existing commercial operation approximately a half mile to the south that exists as a non-conforming use and the airport to the east. The substation this project will connect to is a quarter mile east. Allowable commercial uses are limited in the agricultural district, but the applicants identify this will be a dual use project since sheep grazing and pollinator habitat are incorporated. There is no county limit on solar acres; the threshold is tied to use.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		Concerned with no county limit on the number of solar acres.
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran	X		Dual use for agriculture.
Franklin Hahn		X	Should not be a commercial use in ag district.

Eric Johnson	X		Concerned that there is no county limit on solar acres. Need to have an Ordinance addressing commercial solar.
Chase Munson	X		Ordinance needs to be placed before acceptance.
Richard Schild	X		Dual use.

15. That site specific conditions and such other conditions are established as required for the protection of the public's health, safety, morals, and general welfare.

Staff Analysis: The applicant identified that they conduct extensive research and diligence on each project. This includes wetland reviews, glare studies, meeting fire and electrical codes, State Historic Preservation reviews and Natural Heritage Inventory among others. The purpose of ordinances is to establish regulations intended to protect the public's health, safety, morals and general welfare but there are no specific requirements currently established at the local level established to do so.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		Checked with FAA for different items and include wetlands reviews and glare studies.
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran	X		Thousands of solar projects across the Country and does not think there has been any hard evidence of health and safety concerns with solar. There could be a lot more questions about what is put on the land that could impact health more than solar.
Franklin Hahn	X		
Eric Johnson		X	
Chase Munson	X		
Richard Schild	X		

Chairman Hahn asked for a motion on the findings if there were no additional comments or questions.

Eric Johnson made a motion to accept the findings as presented. Richard Schild seconded. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Chairman Hahn asked for a motion on the conditional use request if there were no additional comments or questions.

General discussion was held by the Board regarding the reason for denial of this Conditional Use Permit.

Johnathon Glasspoole made a motion to recommend the Houston County Board deny a Conditional Use Permit to construct a 5 MW ground mounted solar distribution commercial solar project in an Agricultural Protection District in Caledonia Township.

Larry Gaustad seconded. A roll call vote was taken. Motion carried five to two.

Board Member	Yes	No	Comment
Larry Gaustad	X		
Johnathon Glasspoole	X		
Josh Gran		X	Believes in landowners' rights to use their land as they see fit and within the confines of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan feels it would be allowed because it will continue to be

			an agricultural use
Franklin Hahn	X		
Eric Johnson	X		Need to amend the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and draft an Ordinance before any permit is approved for commercial solar.
Chase Munson	X		Amend the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and form an Ordinance.
Richard Schild		X	Property will still be used for ag whether the commercial aspect is addressed or not. Feels it is a good project.

The application, with the conditions, will be presented to the Houston County Board of Commissioners for final action.

Josh Gran made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Chase Munson seconded. Motion carried.

Submitted by the Planning Commission Clerk on January 23, 2026.