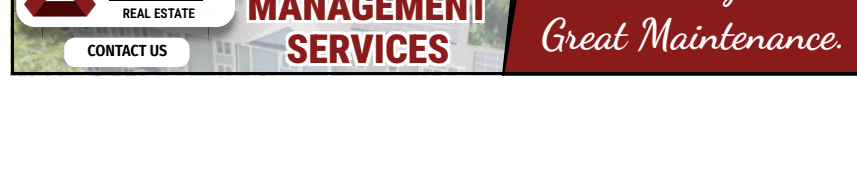
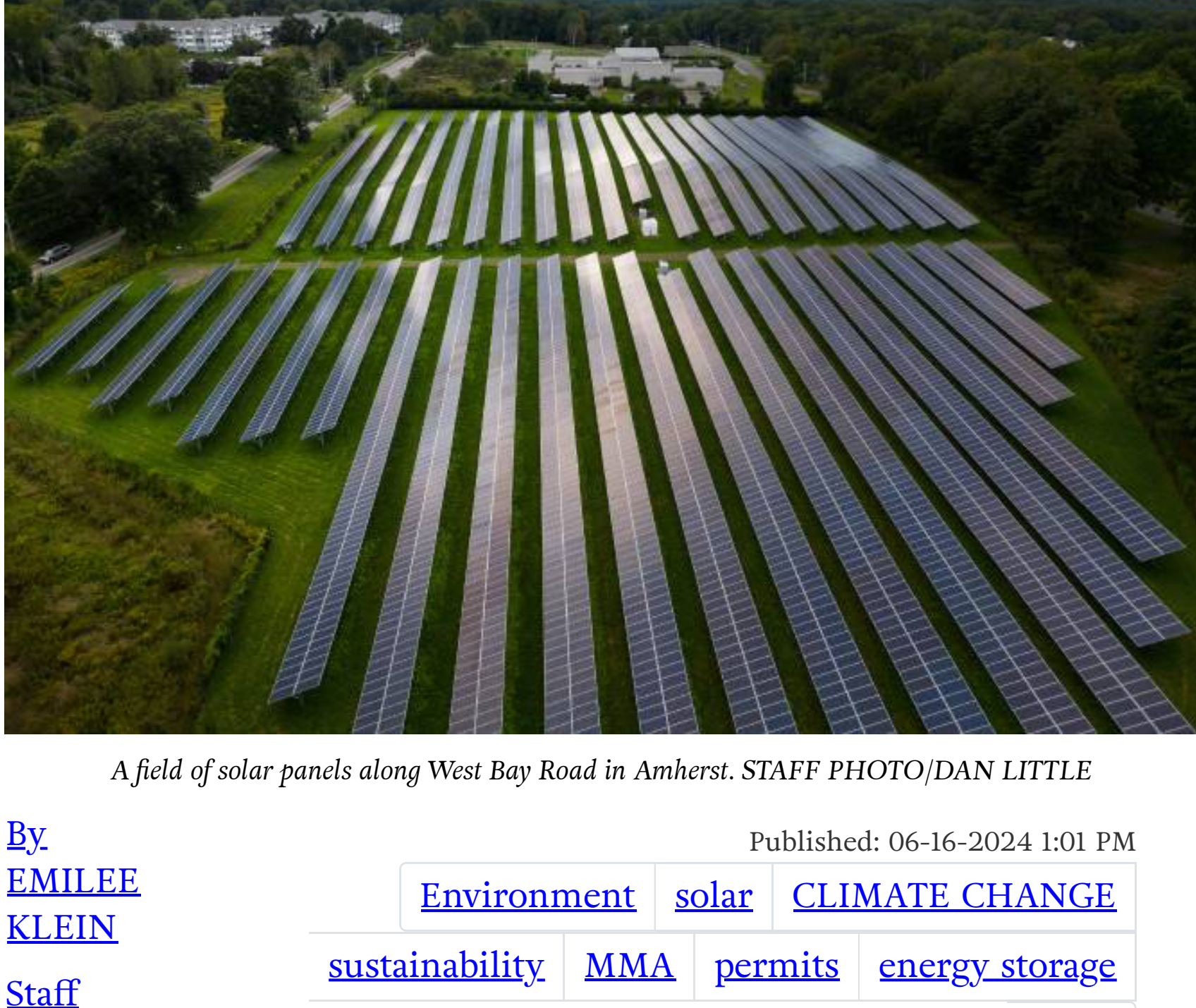


# Daily Hampshire Gazette

HomeNewsOpinionSportsBusinessArts & LifeObituariesClassifiedsCalendarPuzzlesSearch



## Will local control be lost? State climate bill likely to usurp authority over siting of clean energy infrastructure



A field of solar panels along West Bay Road in Amherst. STAFF PHOTO/DAN LITTLE

By  
[EMILEE KLEIN](#)  
Staff  
Writer

Published: 06-16-2024 1:01 PM

[Environment](#) [solar](#) [CLIMATE CHANGE](#)  
[sustainability](#) [MMA](#) [permits](#) [energy storage](#) [siting](#)

Regional planning groups and local municipalities remain wary of the looming implications on municipal jurisdiction should the state's massive climate bill move ahead in the coming weeks with promises to reform the slow process of siting and permitting for clean energy infrastructure projects.

The biggest change on the table is revamping the permitting process by creating a state-led clearinghouse where applicants who want to build large-scale projects would apply to a new state board for approval. Local government officials would still have a chance to weigh in on these projects, but they would not have the final say on whether they are approved or rejected.

"It's very much the [Gov. Healey] administration's view that we will not meet our greenhouse gas reduction limits without some significant reform in the siting and permitting space," Undersecretary of Energy Michael Judge said during a Western Massachusetts Solar Forum webinar held June 4.



The changes to the siting and permitting process, based on recommendations from Gov. Maura Healey's Commission on Clean Energy Infrastructure Siting and Permitting, are expected to be included in the massive climate bill that both House and Senate Democrats have said they plan to tackle before the end of formal sessions in seven weeks.

The commission is charged with recommending ways to accelerate clean energy projects in the state to help meet Massachusetts' decarbonization goals.

### Fixing a poor model

There is general agreement among utility companies, environmental activists and others that the process as it exists today is a poor model, State House News Service reports.

In addition to how long it takes — years in many cases — proceedings can be overly complicated for the public to follow. Siting deliberations are also expensive for both proponents and opponents, don't always incorporate feedback from impacted communities, and disproportionately affect communities with residents who are poorer, part of a minority population or who speak a language other than English.

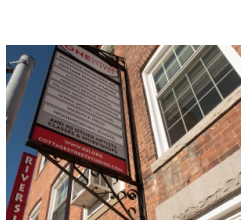
State House News Service reported that the commission recommended consolidating all state, regional and local permits required for larger clean energy infrastructure projects into one permit to be issued by the Energy Facilities Siting Board (EFSB) in no more than 15 months, and to combine all local permits for smaller clean energy infrastructure projects into one consolidated permit to be issued by the municipality in less than one year.

Article continues after...

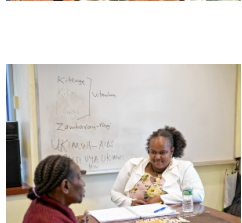
### Yesterday's Most Read Articles



**A treasure reopens: After \$1.4M in repairs, Nonotuck Pool is back in business**



**Northampton School Committee to discuss no-confidence vote in superintendent on Wednesday**



**Easthampton council backs One Cottage Street artists in rent flap**



**Grant will make Five College language learning resources available to thousands**



**Guest columnist Carrie Foley: Public school budgets force private choices**



**The lingering effects of long COVID: Domb hosts second briefing on the topic**

### Your Daily Puzzles



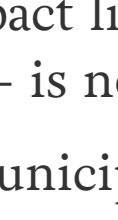
[CrossWord](#)



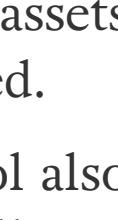
[Flipart](#)



[Typeshift](#)



[SpellTower](#)



[Really Bad Chess](#)

Yet transferring siting and permitting authority of larger projects to the EFSB will supercede the jurisdiction of local municipalities and residents who are directly impacted by solar and energy storage developments. The commission strongly urges codifying a community engagement requirement in the language of the draft bill, but a community benefit agreement — a signed pact listing the assets a developer will provide to the community — is not required.

The same recommendations that remove municipal control also offer funding and a regional officer to guide inexperienced small governments and volunteer-run municipal boards through the new consolidated permitting process.

### Loss of local authority

At a special part two of UMass Extension's Solar Forum, regional planning groups and municipal organizations from western Massachusetts weighed in on the parts of the new climate bill that benefit local municipalities, and which parts are potentially detrimental to local control of these large clean energy infrastructure developments.

"The proposals that have been put forward by the commission are a really fantastic starting point for the conversation," said Adrienne Núñez, legislative analysis from Massachusetts Municipal Association. "However, there are many, many details that are unclear and would theoretically be worked out through various regulatory processes. And as it stands, these details do threaten to disempower municipalities."

The commission's recommendations split energy projects into two categories: solar, wind and biogas plants over 25 megawatts, and those under 25 megawatts. The permitting and siting authority of the latter will stay with local municipalities, while the ESFB will oversee the larger projects.

This divide also applies to energy storage facilities, with 100 megawatts as the threshold. Local governments or residents who wish to provide feedback to the project applications where ESFB has jurisdiction are limited to advisory opinions.

"Those advisory opinions are just that. They're essentially suggestions with no requirement for the developer to actually follow them," Núñez said.

Community engagement would occur before a developer submits an application to the ESFB through pre-filing requirements. Among the recommendations to increase communication are:

- Requiring developers to hold two 90-minute hybrid meetings on the project where half the time is devoted to questions from residents.
- Involve community-based organizations to assist in drafting community benefit agreements.
- Institute a minimum 60-day public comment period.
- Hold meetings between the developer, chief municipal officer and abutters of the project.

"All too often, public engagement starts too late. This is a really critical opportunity for meaningful community involvement to kind of guide the process," said Sanjana Paul, technical associate at MIT Renewable Energy Clinic who researches conflict mediation in the transition to clean energy. "To build trust and to achieve equitable outcomes, we really think that we have to start engaging stakeholders as soon as a project idea is taken to a physical place."

However, as Live Well Springfield Director Samantha Hamilton commented during the forum, "true engagement means acting on the voices we hear" and "intentionally incorporating feedback into the plan" rather than simply listening to community concerns.

While not required, the commission strongly advises the draft bill to include community benefit agreements, which will encourage clean energy developers to pick responsible sites for projects, hire local business for planning and construction, outline a minimum amount of the energy generated by the facility that will remain in the community and offer low-income solar for the communities.

Ken Comia from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission suggests that planning boards or city and town planners who lack the knowledge or staffing to enter into these agreements can follow a similar model to the community benefit meetings hosted by cannabis facilities.

Comia also views the new consolidated permitting process as a net positive for local boards. Each municipal board that reviews developments, like planning boards and conservation commissions, will still issue decisions individually, and then submit them into the same application. As Judge explained at the beginning of the forum, the integrated application will speed up a process that normally takes up to 10 years to complete, not including additional time added by any appeals to decisions.

The recommendations from the Commission on Clean Energy Infrastructure Siting and Permitting suggest the Department of Energy Resources establish a program to provide local governments with regional coordinators and technical assistance to alleviate capacity issues.

"Standardization could result from elements of a process that includes local government," said Catherine Ratte, director of the state's Land Use and Environment Department. "This is not a loss of local control. It is an application and an integration of local control into the early stages of a permitting process, the design of that process."

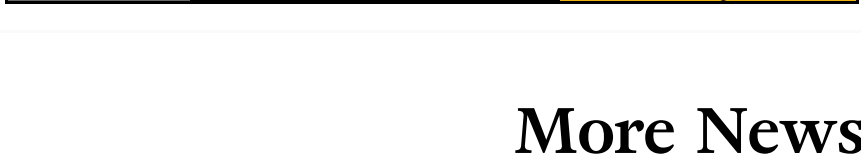
But MMA legal analyst Josie Ahlberg said that standardization could limit municipal enforcement to siting methods and rulemaking processes established the DOER and unidentified stakeholders, threatening the interests and powers of local governments.

"We know that the clean energy projects of the future will touch every city and town across the commonwealth and that these projects have the opportunity to bring considerable disruption but also significant opportunity," she said. "We do not want to see those benefits to the local process be watered down when community members will be the ones living with these projects for decades to come."

Material from State House News Service was used in this report.

Emilee Klein can be reached at [eklein@gazettenet.com](mailto:eklein@gazettenet.com).

[f](#) Share on Facebook [t](#) Share on Twitter [✉](#) Share via E-Mail

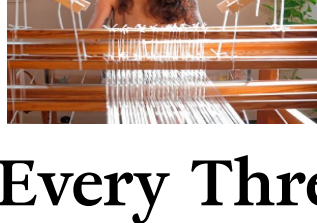


### More News for you



**Easthampton council backs One Cottage Street artists in rent flap**

06-26-2024 4:43 PM



**Every Thread Handwoven in Williamsburg teaches the basics of an ancient craft**

06-26-2024 4:42 PM



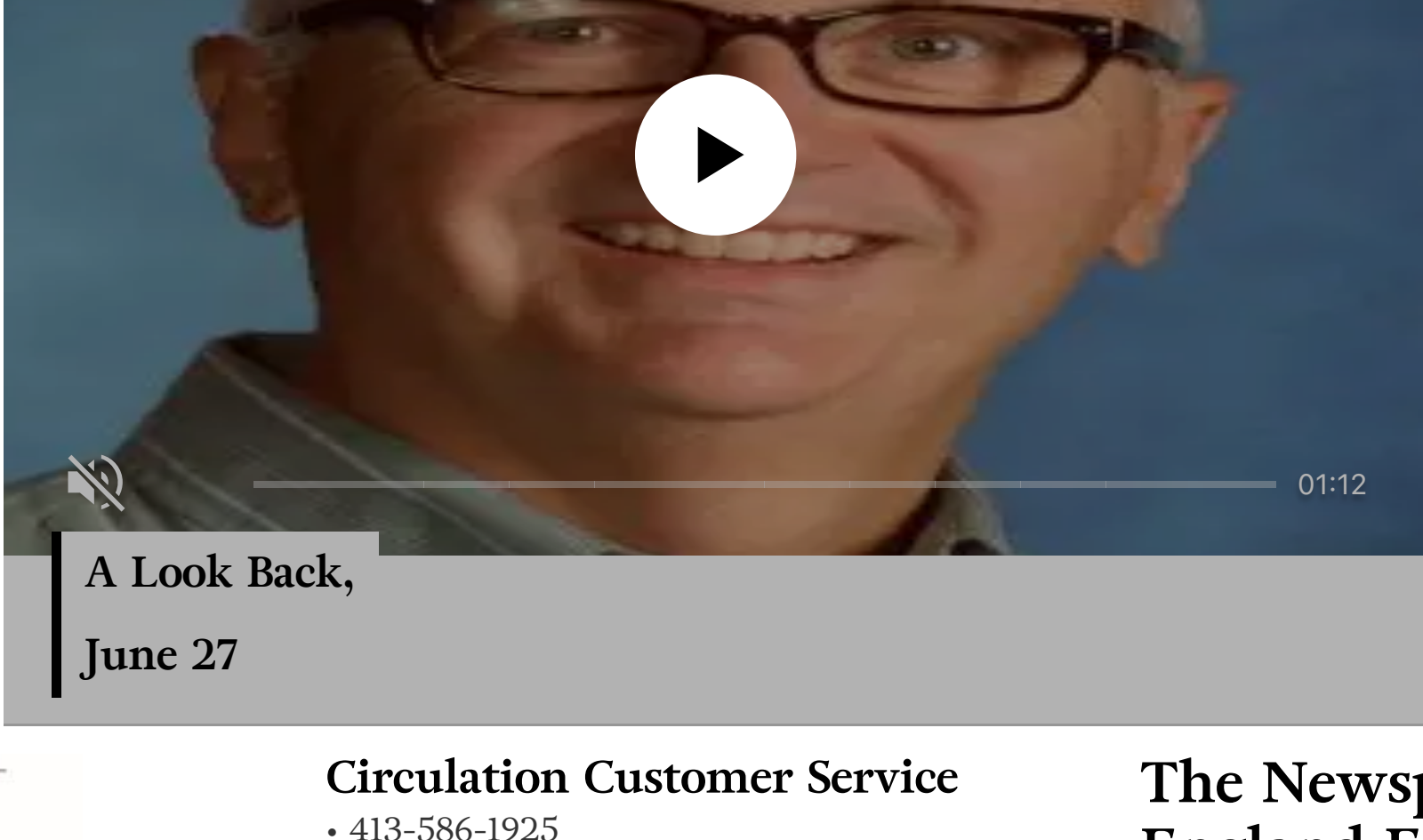
**Area property deed transfers, June 27**

06-26-2024 3:22 PM



**Consumer corner with Anita Wilson: Unraveling the mystery of credit score calculations**

06-26-2024 1:15 PM



23 Service Center Rd  
Northampton, MA 01060  
413-584-5000

- [Terms & Conditions](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [Accessibility](#)

**Circulation Customer Service**  
• 413-586-1925  
• [circulation@gazettenet.com](mailto:circulation@gazettenet.com)

### Social Media

- [Facebook](#)
- [X](#)
- [Youtube](#)
- [Instagram](#)

### The Newspapers of New England Family

- [Amherst Bulletin](#)
- [Athol Daily News](#)
- [Concord Monitor](#)
- [Daily Hampshire Gazette](#)
- [Greenfield Recorder](#)
- [Monadnock Ledger-Transcript](#)
- [Valley News](#)
- [Valley Advocate](#)
- [The Concord Insider](#)
- [Around Concord](#)
- [NNEdigital](#)

