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‘COMPLETELY ELECTRIFIED’

Aerial view of the Bennett-Hemenway Elementary School in Natick. The school will soon be completely electrified — meaning it will not rely on fossil fuels for on-site heating and air conditioning — thanks to a \$2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy. PROVIDED PHOTOS

Natick elementary school lands \$2M federal grant

Tom Benoit
MetroWest Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK

NATICK — The Bennett-Hemenway Elementary School will soon be completely electrified — meaning it will not rely on fossil fuels for on-site heating and air conditioning — thanks to a \$2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy.

Natick Public Schools is a part of the first round for the Renew America’s Schools grant program. The competitive program addresses upgrades at public school facilities.

According to the Department of Energy (DOE), Natick Public Schools plans to make improvements at Bennett-Hemenway Elementary School.

“Staff and students have suffered heat stroke and other heat-related illness due to a lack of centralized air-conditioning during high-degree days,” according to the Department of Energy’s June 29 announcement.

Natick Public Schools requested \$2,037,131, with \$626,795 in a proposed cost share, according to the government. The DOE also reported that Natick Public

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Jillian Wilson-Martin is Natick’s sustainability director.

Suspect in machete case ordered held without bail

Norman Miller
MetroWest Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK

MARLBOROUGH — A man’s hand was nearly severed on Sunday night after authorities allege he was attacked with a machete.

Police arrested Abel Hernandez, 40, after the 8:30 p.m. incident, police Lt. Robert Jusseaume said Monday.

Police responded to 152 Broad St. on Sunday after a report of a man suffering a serious injury.

“The victim’s left arm had a deep laceration at the wrist, and it was nearly severed off,” said Jusseaume. “He was sitting in a pool of his own blood when officers arrived.”

The victim, a 36-year-old man, said he was attacked by a stranger and provided police a description. Police began an investigation and spoke to neighbors who identified Hernandez, who lives at 152

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Permitting reform, officials claim, is key to clean energy

Seamus Webster
Boston University Statehouse Program

BOSTON — As Massachusetts struggles to keep pace with the ambitious clean energy targets it set back in 2021, some lawmakers and advocates see permitting and siting reform as the key to unlocking clean energy infrastructure.

In accordance with the state’s 2021 climate law, last year the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs outlined a “Clean Energy and Climate Plan” setting statewide targets for greenhouse gas emissions in 2025 and 2030 to stay on pace with its 2050 net-zero goal.

The targets — a 33% emissions reduction by 2025 compared to 1990 levels, and a 50% reduction by 2030 — also include specific sublimits and action plans for key emissions sectors such as transportation, buildings and electricity. But to reach those early goals, Massachusetts is going to need to ramp up the rate at which it builds the infrastructure


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Bank of America hit with fines over customer fees

Michelle Chapman
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Bank of America must reimburse customers more than \$100 million and pay \$150 million in fines for “double-dipping” on overdraft fees, withholding reward bonuses on credit cards and opening accounts without customer consent. It is one of the highest financial penalties in years against Bank of America, which has largely spent the last 15 years trying to clean up its reputation and market itself to the public as a bank focused on financial health and not on overdraft fee income. Bank of America will need to refund

\$100 million to customers, pay \$90 million in penalties to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and \$60 million to the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency. “Bank of America wrongfully withheld credit card rewards, double-dipped on fees, and opened accounts without consent,” CFPB Director Rohit Chopra said in a statement. “These practices are illegal and undermine customer trust.” Bank of America had a policy of charging customers \$35 after the bank declined a transaction because the customer did not have enough funds in their account, the CFPB said. The agency determined that the bank double-dipped

by allowing fees to be repeatedly charged for the same transaction. The bank has been cutting down on its reliance on overdraft fee revenue for more than a decade, and cut how much it charges customers for an overdraft to \$15 last year. Brian Moynihan, the bank’s CEO and chairman, told The Associated Press in 2022 that under these new policies, overdraft fee income was down 90% from 2021. The bank said that it voluntarily reduced overdraft fees and eliminated all nonsufficient fund fees in the first half of last year. Bank of America also offered people cash rewards and bonus points when

signing up for a card, but the CFPB said the bank illegally withheld promised credit card account bonuses. The CFPB also found that, since at least 2012, Bank of America employees illegally applied for and enrolled consumers in credit card accounts without their knowledge or authorization. It is a similar charge that was made against Wells Fargo, which paid billions in fines after it was determined that the San Francisco bank opened millions of unauthorized bank accounts in order to meet unrealistic sales goals. In 2014 the CFPB ordered Bank of America to pay \$727 million for illegal credit card practices.

Energy

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necessary to decrease emissions. “We’ve got to at least triple the mainland grid over the next 27 years if we’re going to be hitting our net-zero goals by 2050 and accommodating the electrons that are going to power our homes and our vehicles and our economy,” said Elizabeth Turnbull Henry, president of the Environmental League of Massachusetts. “So we have to just radically reevaluate how we do things.” By 2025, the state’s action plan aims for the commonwealth to have 15,000 public charging stations for electric vehicles and 26% of households fully electrified. But according to the most recently available data, there are currently fewer than 3,000 public EV charging stations, and just over 17% of households are fully electrified.

What’s more, transitioning to fully electric housing and transportation is expected to significantly increase the state’s electricity consumption. The state expects electricity generation to more than double by 2050, which will require additional investments, not only in energy-generating assets like solar and wind farms, but non-generating assets such as battery storage facilities and substations.

But some lawmakers and stakeholders say that those projects aren’t getting off the ground fast enough. Utility companies have to navigate a complicated network of state, local and federal permitting offices, and like other development sectors, community concerns can delay construction for years. State Rep. Jeffrey Roy, D-Franklin, House chair of the Legislature’s Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy Committee, said significant changes will have to be made to the state’s permitting process for energy projects for Massachusetts to reach net-zero by 2050.

“The permitting process right now — it’s frustrating, it’s time-consuming and it’s antithetical to our goals of decarbonizing our buildings and lowering emissions,” he said.

Eversource substation an example of complex permitting

Issues with Massachusetts’ siting and permitting process for energy facilities came to a head last year over an electrical substation Eversource had proposed to build in East Boston back in 2014. In 2017, the Energy Facilities and Siting Board — responsible for reviewing and permitting large energy facilities — gave the project tentative approval. But it also asked Eversource and the City of Boston to negotiate moving the project 200 feet to the west, in order to distance it from a nearby fish processing plant that had said electromagnetic radiation from the substation would impact its machinery.

The siting board gave the project final approval in 2021 after Eversource made the proposed changes, but construction was further delayed when the company struggled to get 14 additional state and local permits it needed to start.

The company was ultimately granted a special certificate from the siting board, allowing it to bypass those approvals, some of which Eversource claimed were “unreasonably conditioned and unduly delayed” by Boston agencies.

Construction on the substation finally began earlier this year. But the project, and the community opposition that surrounded it, exemplified the kind of stakeholder pushback and permitting delays that can tie up energy projects for years.

“At this point many of us are looking at our current regulations and policies around siting and permitting, and acknowledging that those regulations are failing us in at least two ways,” Henry said. “They’re not enabling the delivery of decarbonization infrastructure fast



Eversource recently broke ground on a geothermal pilot project in Framingham that will service 140 customers this fall. From left are Zeyneb Magavi, executive director of Home Energy Efficient Team; state Rep. Priscila Sousa; Bill Akley, president of Eversource Gas; Framingham Mayor Charlie Sisitsky; Nikki Bruno, Eversource vice president of clean technology; and Eversource CEO Joe Nolan.
ART ILLMAN / DAILY NEWS AND WICKED LOCAL

enough... and the community engagement and environmental justice aspects of our current siting and permitting systems are really flawed.”

Roy is taking aim at permitting with two separate bills he’s filed this session that would remove some barriers to decarbonization infrastructure. The first would address permitting for smaller infrastructure projects at the household level.

Under state law, municipalities have the ability to deny, suspend or revoke an energy efficiency or building decarbonization permit due to an outstanding tax lien on a property. That applies to projects which Roy said are critical to decarbonization, such as installing solar panels on roofs and replacing oil fired burners with heat pumps.

Buildings account for roughly 30% of the state’s greenhouse gas emissions, and Roy said preventing building decarbonization projects from going forward due to unpaid tax bills “just doesn’t make sense in the context of global warming and climate change.”

“Say I rent an apartment or I rent a home and I want to put a charging station in to charge my vehicle, and my landlord has an unpaid tax bill,” Roy said. “I’m prohibited from getting that because of the outstanding tax bill. It just doesn’t make sense, when we’re trying to decarbonize buildings and electrify vehicles, that we’re going to put these roadblocks in the way.”

The second bill would be more expansive and address the permitting process for some of Massachusetts’ biggest and most critical clean energy infrastructure.

The legislation would create a new office responsible for the permitting of “electric decarbonization infrastructure projects” — facilities such as substations and battery storage facilities that are essential to improving clean energy distribution and accommodating increased electricity demand.

Legislation would have utilities seek ‘consolidated permit’

Rather than seeking every state and local permit necessary for a project individually, utilities could request a “consolidated permit” from the office encompassing all the approvals necessary for the project’s siting, construction and operation.

“The permitting process would be a parallel process,” Roy said. “So you’ve got local permitting, state permitting, federal permitting — we would put them all on a similar track, as opposed to a sequential way where you got to get your local permit first, and then you can apply for your state permit, and you can apply for your federal permit, and then you have to go back for another local permit.”

Once the office determined a project qualified for a consolidated permit, there would be a 60-day public comment period for community engagement. A final approval for the project would be given no later than six months



This electric vehicle charging station at the Mass Pike westbound rest area in Charlton is not operational. By 2025, the state’s action plan aims for the commonwealth to have 15,000 public charging stations for electric vehicles; currently, there are fewer than 3,000.
RICK CINCLAIR/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

after the start of the public comment period.

“Before all of the design work and all of the initial permitting was done, you’d have stakeholders and community members at the table saying, ‘This is what we want to do,’ and address concerns from the community at the outset,” Roy said. “Once you’ve addressed those concerns, then you’d move into the permitting process, which is vastly different to how it takes place today.”

Henry said ELM was “open-minded” about Roy’s proposal. Having a single office responsible for all of the state’s clean energy permitting, she said, could cut out some of the confusion surrounding the current process.

“For community groups today, it can be really hard to know how to engage and how to intervene,” she said. “Because these permitting processes are bounced between so many different entities. So having one tent where everybody goes ... for a decision could actually create some efficiency and clarity for everyone.”

But she also said she was concerned about how the legislation would impact stakeholder and community engagement.

“The real concern here is the community engagement process, which is not defined in the legislation,” she said. “We as a state have seldom gotten that right. Whether it’s a big real estate development or an energy facility, we don’t really have a playbook for how to do that.”

Community engagement was a sticking point in the effort to build the East Boston substation. Residents repeatedly expressed concerns about the project’s location — across the street from a popular playground in an area prone to flooding — and said the facility was an undue strain on an already overburdened neighborhood.

“The idea of having people engaged earlier is great,” said John Walkey, director of climate justice and waterfront initiatives at Chelsea GreenRoots Inc., the environmental nonprofit that led the fight against the substation. “The question is whether that engagement actually affects the outcome ... what we’d like to see is communities actually having a thumb on the scale for making the

decision.”

Should ‘cumulative impact’ be incorporated into siting decisions?

Lizzi Weyant, deputy director of public affairs for the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, suggested that one strategy the state could use was incorporating a “cumulative impact assessment” into its siting decisions. Rather than looking at the impact a project will have on a community at a specific point in time, cumulative impact assessments take into account how past environmental trends and development have affected the community.

If that kind of analysis had been used to consider the substation in East Boston, Weyant said, the outcome of the project might have looked different. The neighborhood is already home to Boston Logan International Airport, and much of the region’s spent fuel and fuel reserves are stored there.

“That’s had an impact on the community for years,” Weyant said. “So you would actually be taking that impact into account when you’re thinking about the siting, and then maybe it’s not the right place to do the siting, or maybe you need to create additional mitigation efforts or additional benefits to the community to offset (the development).”

Weyant and Henry also said the state should consider setting higher standards for community benefit agreements.

CBAs play an important role in the negotiating process between developers and communities taking on new infrastructure projects. In exchange for project support, developers promise community coalitions benefits such as workforce development or local hiring commitments.

Although CBAs help streamline the community engagement process, Henry said there are major disparities in what different communities are getting and asking for. Lower-income municipalities are often at a disadvantage when negotiating with developers, which she said can exacerbate inequalities between rich and poor communities.

“I think it’s part of what is driving developers to look for poorer communities, because they’re not asking for as much. They’re easier to take advantage of,” Henry said. “So I think having clearer and more standard expectations for community benefits across the board will help all 351 cities and towns, all of whom are going to need to be hosting more energy infrastructure.”

The Healey administration announced this spring that it would launch a new commission focusing on the siting and permitting of clean energy infrastructure, which will examine ways to reduce permitting timelines and ensure a more equitable distribution of benefits from decarbonization infrastructure.

According to a press release from the governor’s office, the commission will be instructed to make recommendations for regulatory and legislative changes to permitting and siting procedures by the end of 2023.

Roy said the Healey administration’s announcement was “perfectly in line” with the aims of the reforms he was proposing, and he hoped to receive input from the commission on framing his legislation.

“It’s my hope and expectation that I will be a part of that commission and work alongside the commission members in conjunction with this legislation,” Roy said. “We have to do it quickly. I don’t want anything to hold up the process of permitting reform.”

Walkey said he believed it was possible to both strengthen community involvement in siting decisions, while also ramping up the development of decarbonization infrastructure.

“We’re hopeful that these don’t have to be mutually exclusive, that we can do something that engages folks,” Walkey said. “And then if you can engage folks to the degree that they become advocates for your project, that will help you move the thing forward as well.”