

IN THE MATTER OF THE APPLICATION OF XCEL ENERGY
FOR A SITE PERMIT
FOR THE UP TO 250 MW SHERCO 3 SOLAR ENERGY GENERATING SYSTEM
IN SHERBURNE COUNTY, MINNESOTA

MINNESOTA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

COMMISSION DOCKET NO. E-002/GS-23-217

OAH DOCKET NO.: 24-2500-39813

DIRECT TESTIMONY OF PETER GITZEN

APRIL 30, 2024

1 **I. INTRODUCTION AND QUALIFICATIONS**

2 **Q. Please state your name and business address.**

3 A. My name is Peter Gitzen, and my business address is 414 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis,
4 Minnesota 55401.

5 **Q. By whom are you employed and in what capacity?**

6 A. I am employed as a Manager of Siting and Land Rights by Norther States Power Company
7 d/b/a Xcel Energy (“Xcel Energy”).

8 **Q. Please describe your educational background and professional experience.**

9 A. I have a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering from the University of Minnesota and am a
10 Licensed Land Surveyor in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Dakota. I have worked on
11 large energy projects as a Surveyor since 2002, first for Ulteig Engineers, Inc. and later for
12 Xcel. I started at Xcel in 2009, and since then have executed several large energy projects,
13 including transmission projects, wind projects, and solar projects.

14 **Q. For whom are you testifying?**

15 A. I am testifying on behalf of Northern State Power Company, a Minnesota corporation doing
16 business as Xcel Energy, in support of its Application for a Site Permit for the up to 250
17 MW Sherco 3 Solar Energy Generating System (“Application”).

18 **Q. What is your role in the Project?**

19 A. I oversee staff and contractors who work with landowners or their authorized
20 representatives on land leasing and easement issues. Specifically, I have been involved in
21 discussions with landowners regarding easements for underground collection corridors. I
22 have also been involved in developing landscaping screening plans for residences and a
23 cemetery located within or adjacent to the Project.

24 **II. OVERVIEW**

25 **Q. What is the purposes of your Direct Testimony?**

26 A. The purpose of my testimony is to provide an update on the on-going discussions with
27 landowners around the Sherco 3 solar project (“Project”) site. Specifically, I will testify to
28 ongoing efforts to obtain a voluntary easement for a collection corridor to Unit 9 and visual
29 impact mitigation discussions with St. Marcus Church and other surrounding landowners.

30 **Q. What attachments are attached to your Direct Testimony?**

31 A. The following schedules are attached to my Direct Testimony:

- Attachment A: Curriculum Vitae
- Attachment B: Landscaping Screening Plan

III. UNDERGROUND COLLECTION CORRIDORS

Q. Ellen Heine provided testimony about the collection corridors between Units 3 and 7. Do you have any other updates on collection corridors?

A. Yes. As mentioned in Xcel Energy’s December 21, 2023 comments in response to public comments received during environmental assessment (EA) scoping, one landowner expressed concern that a potential collection cable crossing his property would interfere with farm work. As shown in Attachment B from E. Heine’s Direct Testimony, Xcel Energy has identified two possible collection corridors for this location, which would connect Unit 9 to a collection corridor south of Highway 10. Xcel Energy continues to work with the owners of land along both possible collection corridors to discuss the possibility of securing a voluntary easement across one of the properties.

Regardless of which properties are ultimately impacted, Xcel Energy is sensitive to concerns about impacts to agricultural land and plans to locate the collection corridor along the edge of existing fields and bury any cabling underground to minimize impacts to agricultural production.

IV. VISUAL SCREENING PLAN

Q. Father Joseph Backowski, the Parochial Administrator of St. Marcus Catholic Church commented with concerns about the visual impacts of the project on the St. Marcus Cemetery. Are you familiar with his comments?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you have any response to his comments?

A. Yes. I agree with Father Joseph that the primary impacts of a solar project are visual and that mitigation measures, such as planting trees, should minimize visual impacts. Because the primary impacts of a solar project are visual, I disagree with Father Joseph’s conclusion that the best comparison for screening is livestock operations. Livestock operations cause noise and odor in addition to visual impact. Instead, the screening requirements for residential properties adjacent to solar are the best comparison for the appropriate visual screening required to mitigate visual impact for the St. Marcus cemetery.

62 Father Joseph’s proposed mitigation plan, which relies on livestock operations as a
63 comparison, requires extensive setbacks that would sacrifice valuable Project area. He
64 suggests a one-half mile setback to the south and west of the project, along with three rows
65 of 2–3-year-old Black Hills Spruce. Father Joseph suggests Black Hills Spruce specifically
66 because they tolerate dry conditions and retain fullness as they age. In addition, Father
67 Joseph proposes one row of potted Redosier Dogwood, because the use of red and green
68 branches with white flowers in the spring will be effective and beautiful.

69 Although I disagree with the specifics of Father Joseph’s plan, I agree with the
70 intent. Effective screening should be vegetated year-round and visually pleasing. For this
71 reason, Xcel Energy plans to use the same visual screening between the Project and the
72 cemetery as with nearby residences.

73 **Q. How do the current project setbacks compare to Father Joseph’s proposal and other**
74 **setbacks for the project?**

75 A. The Project solar array is approximately 247 feet south of the southern St. Marcus cemetery
76 property line and approximately 95 feet from the south-east corner of the St. Marcus
77 cemetery property line. As currently designed, the minimum Project setbacks at some
78 residences and residential buildings located near the Project are approximately 250- and
79 280-feet from homes to the nearest solar arrays (See Appendix E of the Site Permit
80 Application). This is less than the one-half-mile setback proposed by Father Joseph, but
81 more than the applicable local setbacks. The Project’s setbacks exceed Sherburne County’s
82 required setback of 50 feet from adjacent property lines, which applies to residences and
83 the cemetery, as well as the City of Clear Lake’s required setbacks, which range between
84 10 and 50 feet from rear and side-yard property lines depending on the zoning district in
85 which the solar array is located.

86 **Q. In addition to the setbacks that you noted, will there be other mitigation measures to**
87 **avoid the visual impacts of the Project on the St. Marcus cemetery?**

88 A. Yes. Xcel Energy will use landscape screening areas to disrupt the direct line of site from
89 the cemetery to the Project. Landscape screening areas—areas consisting of vegetation to
90 disrupt the direct line of site between a nearby property and the solar array—are sometimes
91 used in solar projects to mitigate visual impacts. Xcel Energy is committed to using
92 landscape screening areas to screen visual impacts from the Project on neighboring

93 landowners, as noted in the Landscape Screening Plan for the Project (Attachment B). The
94 first page of the Landscape Screening Plan outlines planting details and vegetative
95 screening selection. As noted in the Landscape Screening Plan, Xcel will place native
96 evergreen trees that grow well in the Project area’s climate, at strategic locations across the
97 Project site to limit direct views of the array. Native plants and other regionally appropriate
98 species establish more quickly and have higher survival rates—which will achieve Father
99 Joseph’s goal of ensuring that plants thrive in the area. Xcel selected evergreen trees that
100 will provide year-round screening, as Father Joseph noted was important to a visual
101 mitigation plan. As the plants mature, they will grow closer together and create a natural
102 hedge. Sheets L.200 & L.202 show that landscape screening will be used between the
103 Project and the St. Marcus cemetery.

104 The Landscape Screening Plan is consistent with the screening planted at
105 operational solar gardens located in Clear Lake Township, and plant selection and spacing
106 provided the Landscape Screening Plan will be more than adequate to provide visual
107 screening between the cemetery and the array once installed along the southern and
108 southeastern portions of the cemetery.

109 **Q. Has Xcel contacted Father Joseph or others at St. Marcus Church about the proposed**
110 **screening measures?**

111 A. Yes. Xcel emailed the Landscape Screening Plan to Father Joseph, and left a voicemail
112 message for Father Joseph, seeking further discussion.

113 **Q. Has Xcel communicated the proposed screening measures with affected neighboring**
114 **homes?**

115 A. Yes. The Landscape Screening Plan was mailed to affected landowners together with an
116 invitation to contact me with any questions or concerns about the landscaping proposed in
117 between their home and the solar array. No affected landowners have expressed
118 displeasure with the proposed plans to date.

119 **III. CONCLUSION**

120 **Q. Does this conclude your Direct Testimony?**

121 A. Yes.

Peter D. Gitzen

Work Experience

Xcel Energy Inc., Minneapolis, MN**Manger of Siting and Land Rights, July 2014 to present**

- Managed a team of land agents, GIS analysts, and surveyors to support projects across multiple business units at Xcel Energy.
- Successfully achieved objectives for Xcel, including acquisition and construction of numerous renewable projects (wind and solar) and acquisition of easements and land rights for electric, distribution, and gas projects.
- Spearheaded the transition of the Siting and Land Rights group from paper records to electronic, implementing Landworks and GIS mapping of Xcel land rights.
- Leadership role in the transmission UAV virtual inspection project, incorporating AI technology to assist inspectors.
- Demonstrated strong negotiation skills with external parties and effectively coordinated with various stakeholders within Xcel.
- Possesses in-depth knowledge of Xcel's core business, contributing to overall success in the role.

Supervisor of Survey, January 2009 to July 2014

- Led and supervised a group of 7-10 surveyors in the Land Surveying Group, ensuring efficient execution of survey work across various business units at Xcel, including electric transmission, electric and gas distribution, energy supply, and real estate services.
- Successfully established the LiDAR program in compliance with NERC FAC-008, enabling accurate ratings for the entire bulk electric system.
- Executed the CapX series of projects, including CapX Fargo and La Cross, overseeing survey work for hundreds of miles of new 345kV lines. This involved conducting design, construction, and as-built surveys, as well as legal surveys for property line establishment and drafting of legal descriptions for right of way and land acquisition.
- Provided expert witness support for eminent domain cases, demonstrating extensive knowledge and expertise in the field.

Ulteig Engineers, Inc., Minneapolis, MN

Market Leader/Project Surveyor, December 2002 – December 2009

- Led the Minneapolis Market in the Land Services Sector at Ulteig Engineers from June to December 2008
- Oversaw operations of a survey group in the Minneapolis Office, managing a team of 6 to 8 direct reports
- Executed staffing, staff reviews, contract negotiation, estimating and bidding, budgeting, account receivables, project management, and resource allocation
- Supervised field crew and office staff, ensuring adherence to surveying standards and quality assurance
- Developed new business opportunities through effective client relationship management and business development strategies
- Collaborated with engineers, right of way agents, and land owners to provide surveying support for various utility projects
- Managed projects for clients including Xcel, GRE, SMMPA, Qwest, BP, Minnesota Power, Florida Power and Light, Alliant (ITC), Mid-America, etc.
- Facilitated equipment purchasing and safety assurance to ensure smooth project execution
- Promoted staff development through training and mentorship programs
- Held the position of Project Surveyor from December 2002 to June 2008, with similar responsibilities as listed above except staffing and staff reviews.

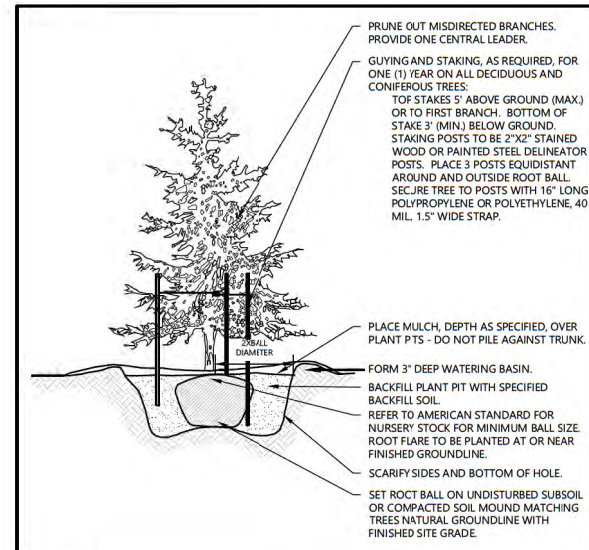
Professional Credentials

- Licensed Land Surveyor State of Minnesota
- Licensed Land Surveyor State of Wisconsin
- Licensed Land Surveyor State of North Dakota
- Engineer in Training, State of Minnesota

Education

Bachelor of Science Civil Engineering (December 2002), University of Minnesota

PLANTING DETAILS



Westwood EVERGREEN TREE PLANTING LA01
 NOT TO SCALE

PRELIMINARY BUFFER & SCREENING PLANT MATERIAL



PRELIMINARY BUFFER & SCREENING PLANT SPECIES LIST

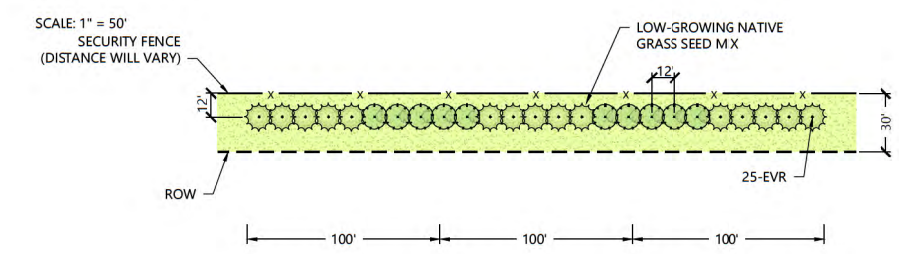
SYMBOL	COMMON NAME	BOTANICAL NAME	SIZE	MATURE HEIGHT	MATURE WIDTH
CONIFEROUS TREES					
	MOONGLOW JUNIPER	JUNIPERUS SCOPULORUM 'MOONGLOW'	6' HT B&B	15 - 25ft. ht.	6 - 10ft. w.
	EASTERN RED CEDAR	JUNIPERUS VIRGINIANA	6' HT B&B	25 - 40ft. ht.	15 - 25ft. w.
	BLACK HILLS SPRUCE	PICEA GLAUCIA DENSATA	6' HT B&B	25 - 40ft. ht.	15 - 25ft. w.
	WHITE PINE	PINUS STROBUS	6' HT B&B	40 - 65ft. ht.	25 - 40ft. w.
	DARK AMERICAN ARBORVITAE	THUJA OCCIDENTALIS 'DARK GREEN'	6' HT B&B	15 - 25ft. ht.	10 - 15ft. w.

NOTES: (1.) QUANTITIES ON PLAN SUPERSEDE LIST QUANTITIES IN THE EVENT OF A DISCREPANCY.
 (2.) B.B. SPECIFIES ROOT TYPE AS BALLED AND BURLAPPED.
 (3.) H.T. SPECIFIES MINIMUM SPECIMEN HEIGHT UPON INSTALLATION.
 (4.) PLANT SPECIES SUBJECT TO CHANGE BASED UPON AVAILABILITY AT TIME OF PLANTING

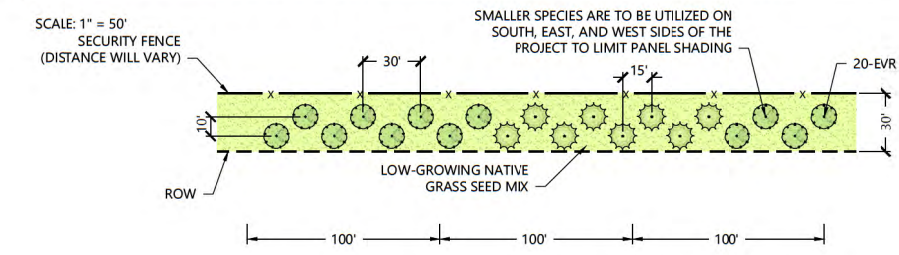
VEGETATIVE SCREENING SELECTION & INTENT

THE PROPOSED PLANS INCLUDE INSTALLING VEGETATIVE LANDSCAPE BUFFERS WHICH UTILIZE, TO THE EXTENT COMMERCIALY PRACTICABLE, NATIVE TREES AND SHRUBS OR OTHER SPECIES THAT GROW WELL IN THIS CLIMATE AT STRATEGIC LOCATIONS ACROSS THE PROJECT SITE TO LIMIT DIRECT VIEWS OF THE ARRAY. ONE BENEFIT TO USING NATIVE PLANTS OR OTHER REGIONALLY APPROPRIATE SPECIES IS THAT THEY ARE ACCLIMATED TO THE PARTICULAR CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS, THUS ALLOWING FOR A QUICKER ESTABLISHMENT AND INCREASED SURVIVAL RATES. THE PROPOSED VEGETATIVE LANDSCAPE BUFFERS ARE COMPOSED OF EVERGREEN TREES THAT CAN PROVIDE LUSH GREEN YEAR ROUND SCREENING. BEYOND THE AESTHETIC VALUE, THE PROPOSED PLANTS CAN PROVIDE ADDITIONAL WILDLIFE BENEFITS THAT INCLUDE A SOURCE FOR POLLINATORS, SHELTER, FORAGE AND WINTER HABITAT. AS THE PLANTS MATURE THEY WILL GROW CLOSER TOGETHER CREATING A TYPE OF NATURAL HEDGE.

LANDSCAPE BUFFER: 1 ROW OF EVERGREENS



LANDSCAPE BUFFER: 2 STAGGERED ROWS OF EVERGREENS



PREPARED FOR:



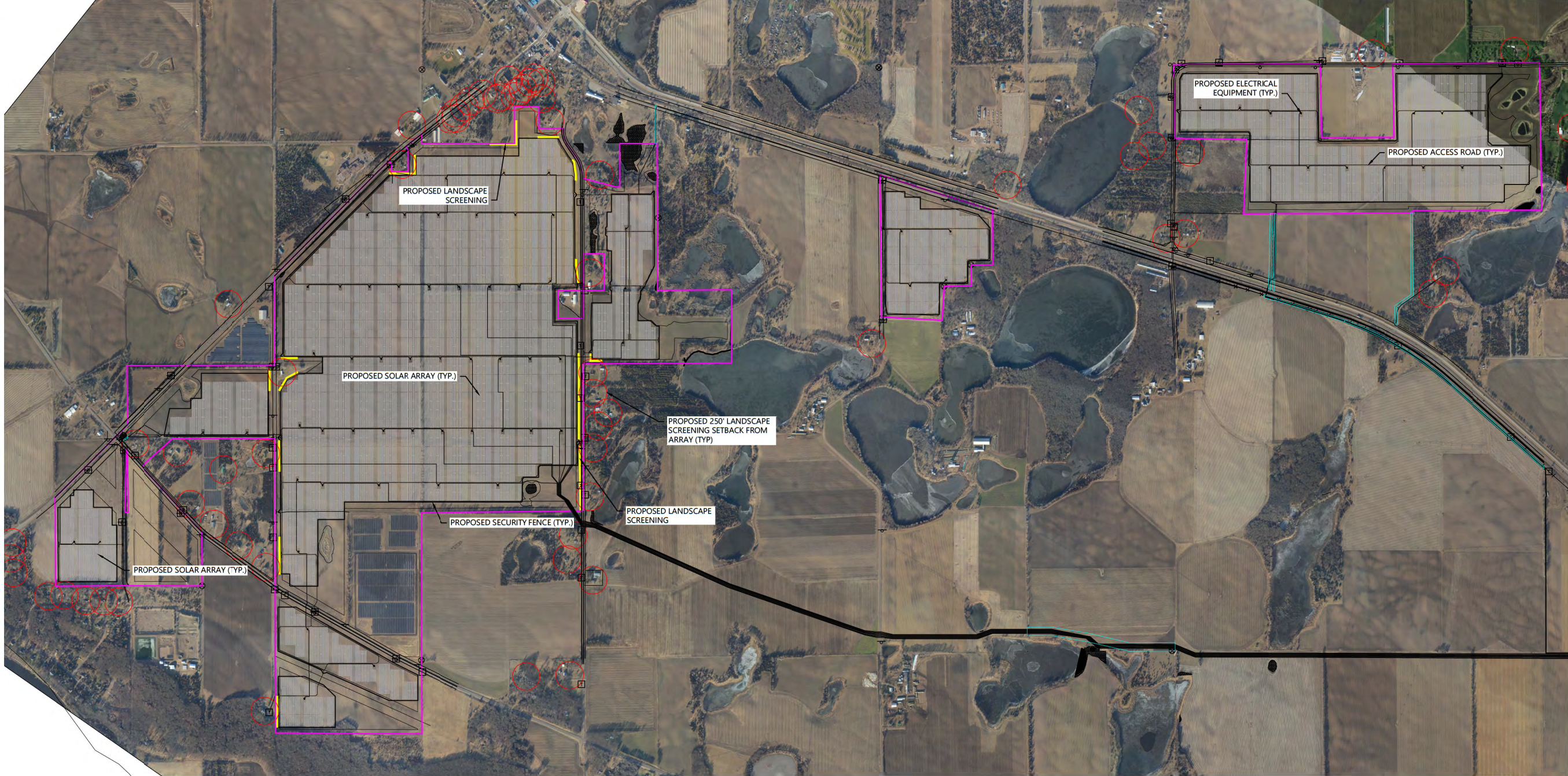
414 Nicollet Mall, (GO 6)
 Minneapolis, MN 55401

REVISIONS:
 # DATE COMMENT BY CHK APR

Sherco 3 Solar
 Sherburne County, MN

Landscape Screening
 Detail Sheet

DATE: 04-08-24 REV:
 SHEET: L.100



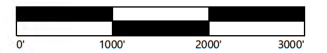
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 Minneapolis, MN 55401

REVISIONS:

#	DATE	COMMENT	BY	CHK	APR



LEGEND:

	PROJECT BOUNDARY
	PARCEL LINES
	RIGHT-OF-WAY LINES
	EX. TREELINE
	EX. PAVED ROAD
	EX. GRAVEL ROAD
	EX. FENCE
	EX. OVERHEAD POWER
	EX. STREAM CHANNEL
	EX. WETLAND
	PROPOSED SOLAR ARRAY
	PROPOSED MODULE SETBACK
	PROPOSED ACCESS ROAD
	PROPOSED SECURITY FENCE
	PROPOSED ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT
	PROPOSED LANDSCAPE SCREENING
	PROPOSED 250' LANDSCAPE SCREENING SETBACK

Sherco 3 Solar
 Sherburne County, MN

Overall Landscape
 Screening Plan

NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION

DATE: 04-08-24 REV:
 SHEET: L.200

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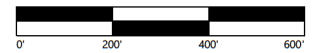
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Minneapolis, MN 55401

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#	DATE	COMMENT	BY	CHK	APR



Sherco 3 Solar

Sherburne County, MN

Landscape Screening Plan

NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION

DATE: 04-08-24 REV:
SHEET: L.201



- LEGEND:**
- PROJECT BOUNDARY
 - PARCEL LINES
 - RIGHT-OF-WAY LINES
 - EX. TREELINE
 - EX. PAVED ROAD
 - EX. GRAVEL ROAD
 - EX. FENCE
 - EX. OVERHEAD POWER
 - EX. STREAM CHANNEL
 - EX. WETLAND
 - PROPOSED SOLAR ARRAY
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 - PROPOSED ACCESS ROAD
 - PROPOSED SECURITY FENCE
 - PROPOSED ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT
 - PROPOSED LANDSCAPE SCREENING
 - PROPOSED 250' LANDSCAPE SCREENING SETBACK

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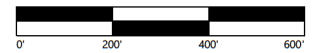
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Sherco 3 Solar

Sherburne County, MN

Landscape Screening Plan

NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION

DATE: 04-08-24 REV:
 SHEET: L.202



- LEGEND:**
- PROJECT BOUNDARY
 - PARCEL LINES
 - RIGHT-OF-WAY LINES
 - EX. TREELINE
 - EX. PAVED ROAD
 - EX. GRAVEL ROAD
 - EX. FENCE
 - EX. OVERHEAD POWER
 - EX. STREAM CHANNEL
 - EX. WETLAND
 - PROPOSED SOLAR ARRAY
 - PROPOSED MODULE SETBACK
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 - PROPOSED ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT
 - PROPOSED LANDSCAPE SCREENING
 - PROPOSED 250' LANDSCAPE SCREENING SETBACK

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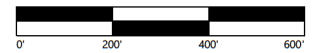
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Minneapolis, MN 55401

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Sherco 3 Solar

Sherburne County, MN

Landscape Screening Plan

NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION

DATE: 04-08-24 REV:
SHEET: L.203



- LEGEND:**
- PROJECT BOUNDARY
 - PARCEL LINES
 - RIGHT-OF-WAY LINES
 - EX. TREELINE
 - EX. PAVED ROAD
 - EX. GRAVEL ROAD
 - EX. FENCE
 - EX. OVERHEAD POWER
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 - PROPOSED SOLAR ARRAY
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 - PROPOSED LANDSCAPE SCREENING
 - PROPOSED 250' LANDSCAPE SCREENING SETBACK

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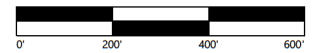
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Sherco 3 Solar

Sherburne County, MN

Landscape Screening Plan

NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION

DATE: 04-08-24

SHEET: L.204

REV:



- LEGEND:**
- PROJECT BOUNDARY
 - PARCEL LINES
 - RIGHT-OF-WAY LINES
 - EX. TREELINE
 - EX. PAVED ROAD
 - EX. GRAVEL ROAD
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