

**STATE OF MINNESOTA
BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION**

Katie Sieben	Chair
Joseph Sullivan	Vice-Chair
Valerie Means	Commissioner
Matt Schuerger	Commissioner
John Tuma	Commissioner

In the Matter of the Petition of Northern States Power Company for Approval of its Proposed Community Solar Gardens Program

DOCKET NO. E-002/M-13-867

In the Matter of Xcel Energy's Tariff Revisions Updating Community Solar Garden Tariff Providing Additional Customer Protections in Subscription Eligibility

DOCKET NO. E-002/M-21-695

**COMMENTS OF THE OFFICE OF
THE ATTORNEY GENERAL**

INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Attorney General—Residential Utilities Division (“OAG”) respectfully submits the following Comments in response to the Commission’s November 22, 2022 Notice of Comment Period on Xcel Energy’s (“Xcel” or “the Company”) November 11, 2022 compliance filing proposing revisions to its community solar garden (“CSG” or “solar garden”) program tariff. The tariff revisions create requirements for CSGs that are affiliated with apartment buildings. Specifically, landlords would be required to obtain a tenant’s informed consent before enrolling the tenant’s unit in a solar garden, allow tenants to opt out at any time, and provide enrolled tenants with protections from disconnection and eviction for failure to pay their electric bill. Because the proposed revisions appropriately balance the need to make solar gardens reasonably accessible and the need to protect low-income tenants from financial arrangements that may not benefit them, the Commission should approve Xcel’s proposal.

BACKGROUND

I. PRIOR PROCEEDINGS

On October 23, 2021, Xcel, Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid, Energy Cents Coalition, and the Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota (collectively, “the Joint Petitioners”) filed a petition proposing modifications to Xcel’s CSG tariff. The proposed modifications would have required that any CSG subscription associated with a rental property be in the name of the tenant rather than the landlord and that the tenant be an Xcel account holder.¹ The purpose of this change was to prevent a landlord from taking control of its tenants’ electric accounts to subscribe them to a community solar garden (an arrangement that has been referred to as a “building subscription”²). The Joint Petitioners reported that some low-income tenants had been involuntarily enrolled in building subscriptions and had lost their energy assistance benefits because they were no longer the Xcel account holder for their unit.

Several parties suggested that, rather than disqualifying CSG subscriptions held by landlords on behalf of their tenants, Xcel could modify its energy assistance programs to allow tenants to receive the benefits they would qualify for if they remained Xcel account holders.³

On June 24, 2022, the Commission issued an Order Denying Petition, Addressing Low-Income Energy Assistance Programs, and Requiring Further Proceedings. The Commission declined to adopt the Joint Petitioners’ proposal, finding that it was not clear that the proposal would provide the most appropriate remedy. The Commission instead directed Xcel to, among other things, convene a stakeholder group to further discuss the issues and to propose a tariff

¹ The modification would, however, have exempted single-meter apartment buildings from this requirement.

² For a description of the “building subscription model” see the Initial Comments of TBR, LLC at 4–5 (Nov. 15, 2022).

³ See, e.g., OAG Letter at 3 (Dec. 6, 2021); Department Reply Comments at 6 (Dec. 6, 2021); City of Minneapolis Comments at 1–2 (Nov. 15, 2021).

modification to PowerOn and other Xcel-administered low-income assistance programs to ensure that tenants can qualify for these programs even if they are not billed directly by Xcel.

II. XCEL’S TARIFF FILING

On November 11, 2022, Xcel made a compliance filing that included a new set of proposed revisions to its CSG tariff. At a high level, the proposed revisions provide that, with certain exceptions, if a premise associated with a CSG subscription is occupied by residential tenant, and the landlord is the named customer on the Xcel account, then the landlord must obtain the tenant’s written consent before transferring the account and enrolling the unit (“opt in”) and must also allow a tenant to “opt out” at any time and regain control of their account.⁴ Xcel’s tariff revisions also include a tenant opt-in form that informs tenants that by “closing my Xcel Energy account and agreeing to be rebilled for electric usage by the Landlord . . . I will no longer be eligible for any Xcel Energy Affordability Programs (PowerOn, Medical Assistance Program, Senior Low Income Discount).”

Xcel does not propose revisions to its affordability programs that would allow tenants who are not account holders to receive energy assistance. The Company contends that extending affordability benefits to tenants who no longer retain an Xcel account is inconsistent with Minnesota Statutes and is unworkable as a practical matter.

Finally, Xcel proposes additional tariff modifications that would (1) lower the usage threshold to qualify for PowerOn and (2) add several protections for tenants who opt into a whole-building CSGs. The latter protections include, among other things:

- A landlord must not disconnect a tenant’s unit from electric service for nonpayment of electric service charges;

⁴ See Xcel Compliance Filing, attach. F (tariff redlines) at sheets 66.1, 99.1 (Nov. 11, 2022).

- A landlord must not charge fees for utility bill processing, or for account transfer, unless explicitly permitted by law;
- For unpaid electric balances over \$10, a landlord may not charge late fees greater than the larger of \$1 or 1.5 percent;
- A landlord must not bring a nonpayment eviction action solely because of unpaid electric service charges;
- A landlord must apply partial payments toward rent before utility charges;
- A landlord must offer a dispute-resolution process; and
- A landlord must offer payment agreements during the Cold Weather Rule period and provide other Cold Weather Rule protections.⁵

ANALYSIS

I. XCEL’S PROPOSED TARIFF REVISIONS WOULD PROTECT LOW-INCOME RENTERS AND SHOULD BE APPROVED.

Xcel’s new CSG tariff-modification proposal is a substantial improvement over the original proposal. Unlike the original proposal, which would have invalidated nearly all CSG subscriptions associated with individually metered rental units for which the landlord pays the Xcel bill, the current proposal allows for this type of “building subscription” arrangement but ensures that low-income tenants enter into it knowingly and voluntarily. The proposal thus appropriately balances the goals of making solar gardens accessible to residents of rental properties and protecting customers who need access to energy assistance. Xcel’s opt-in/opt-out proposal should be approved.

Xcel’s tariff proposal also provides several protections for tenants who voluntarily opt into building-subscription CSGs. These protections include requirements that landlords not disconnect tenants for nonpayment of electric charges; that landlords not bring a nonpayment eviction action

⁵ *Id.*, sheets 99.1–2.

solely based on unpaid electric service charges; that landlords offer payment agreements to tenants in arrears; and that landlords apply partial payments toward rent before applying it toward electricity charges. These and other consumer-protection conditions included in the proposed tariff revisions would greatly benefit low-income households participating in building-subscription CSGs and should be approved.

Finally, the proposal would lower the usage threshold for PowerOn eligibility from 750 to 300 kWh per month. From conversations with the Company, the OAG understands that this lower threshold is consistent with what the Company's current practice already is—i.e., Xcel already offers PowerOn to customers with lower usage than 750 kWh as funding allows. And because lowering the threshold is consistent with current practice, the OAG understands that the Company does not expect the cost of the program to change as a result of this formal change to the tariff. The OAG supports modifying the PowerOn tariff to make it consistent with current practice.

II. MAKING SOLAR GARDENS “REASONABLY ACCESSIBLE” DOES NOT REQUIRE ACCOMMODATING THE BUILDING SUBSCRIPTION MODEL.

The Community Solar Garden Statute requires that any solar-garden program approved by the Commission “reasonably allow for the creation, financing, and accessibility of community solar gardens” and be consistent with the public interest.⁶ The statute thus requires the Commission to approve program parameters that will make solar gardens as accessible as reasonably possible considering the various policies and interests at play. It does not require the Commission to prioritize the creation, financing, and accessibility of solar gardens above all other goals. Nor does it require the Commission to modify unrelated programs, such as PowerOn, to accommodate landlords’ or solar-garden operators’ business models.

⁶ Minn. Stat. § 216B.1641(e)(1), (4).

As discussed earlier, Xcel’s current proposal reasonably balances the competing goals of making solar gardens reasonably accessible and ensuring that low-income tenants have access to energy assistance. While the OAG previously recommended that PowerOn be modified to provide benefits to low-income tenants that are not Xcel account holders, such as tenants participating in building-subscription CSGs, the OAG is no longer persuaded that the benefits of doing so would justify the costs.

Xcel has identified significant challenges to administering PowerOn benefits to tenants that are not the named customer on the bill.⁷ Moreover, as the Joint Petitioners have pointed out, there are risks to tenants when they are no longer an Xcel account holder and are rebilled for utility service by their landlord or a third party. Modifying PowerOn to accommodate building CSG subscriptions would tend to magnify these risks by encouraging vulnerable customers to give up control of their utility accounts and the regulatory protections that come with it.

On the other side of the scale, the benefits of modifying PowerOn to accommodate this arrangement appear minimal. In part, this is because the universe of affected tenants is small: Sagiliti, a third-party biller involved in this docket, stated that out of the more than 4,000 tenants that it bills in Xcel’s service territory, only 120 or so reside in buildings with an associated solar garden.⁸ It is likely that not all these tenants are low-income. This means that Xcel would have to incur significant administrative costs to address an issue that affects relatively few tenants. Perhaps more important is the fact that the building subscription model is not needed for tenants to participate in community solar. Low-income tenants can already access both energy assistance and community solar by opting out of a building-subscription CSG, taking over the Xcel account for their unit, and subscribing directly to a solar garden. Since building subscriptions are not

⁷ Xcel Compliance Filing at 16–17.

⁸ *Id.* at 18.

necessary for residential tenants to participate in community solar, there appears to be no urgent need to modify PowerOn to accommodate this arrangement.⁹

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the Commission should approve Xcel's proposed revisions to its community-solar-garden program tariff.

Dated: December 21, 2022

Respectfully submitted,

KEITH ELLISON
Attorney General
State of Minnesota

/s/ **Peter G. Scholtz**

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⁹ The OAG recognizes that third-party billing arrangements exist outside the building-subscription CSG context. However, there is not a record in this case to support changes to PowerOn based on that broader context, nor is it apparent why landlords' preference for a certain billing arrangement should shape utility energy-assistance programs.



The Office of
Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison
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December 21, 2022

Mr. Will Seuffert
Executive Secretary
Minnesota Public Utilities Commission
121 7th Place East, Suite 350
St. Paul, MN 55101

Re: *In the Matter of the Petition of Northern States Power Company for Approval of its Proposed Community Solar Garden Program*
MPUC Docket No. E-002/M-13-867

In the Matter of Xcel Energy's Tariff Revisions Updating Community Solar Garden Tariff Providing Additional Customer Protections in Subscription Eligibility
MPUC Docket No. E-002/M-21-695

Dear Mr. Seuffert:

Enclosed and e-filed in the above-referenced matter please find Comments of the Minnesota Office of the Attorney General—Residential Utilities Division.

By copy of this letter all parties have been served. A Certificate of Service is also enclosed.

Sincerely,

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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

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I, JULIE ANN JEPPESEN, hereby certify that on the 21st day of December, 2022, I e-filed with eDockets *Comments of the Minnesota Office of The Attorney General—Residential Utilities Division* and served a true and correct copy of the same upon all parties listed on the attached service list as receiving Electronic Service by e-mail and/or electronic submission.

/s/ Julie Ann Jeppesen
JULIE ANN JEPPESEN

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

Re: *In the Matter of the Petition of Northern States Power Company for Approval of its Proposed Community Solar Garden Program*
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I, PATRICIA JOE JOTBLAD, hereby certify that on the 21st day of December, 2022, I served a true and correct copy of the document(s) identified above upon all parties listed on the attached service list as receiving “Paper Service” by United States Mail with postage prepaid, and deposited the same in a U.S. Post Office mail receptacle in the City of St. Paul, Minnesota.

/s/ Patricia Joe Jotblad
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