STATE OF MINNESOTA BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

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Valerie Means Commissioner
Matthew Schuerger Commissioner
Joseph Sullivan Commissioner
John Tuma Commissioner

In the Matter of an Xcel Payment Plan Credit Proposal

Docket No. E002/M-20-760

Comments of the Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota

I. Introduction

The Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota ("CUB", "we", "our", "us") submits these comments in response to the Commission's July 24, 2023 Notice of Comment Period. In short, we recommend that the Commission approve Xcel's proposal regarding the remaining funds from its Payment Plan Credit Program (the "Program"). We offer some observations and comments below that we hope help preserve some lessons learned from this Program.

II. Procedural History

Xcel Energy ("Xcel" or "the Company") filed comments on September 15, 2020 in Docket number 20-492 (the "Economic Recovery Docket") outlining numerous proposals that could aid in Minnesota's economic recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic.¹ Among Xcel's proposals filed in that docket was a proposal to establish a Payment Plan Credit program, which Xcel summarized at the time as follows:

The Payment Plan Credit program has been designed to provide relief to residential electric customers who are in arrears and have continued to accumulate a delinquent balance during the months of the pandemic. Customers with a current balance between \$1,000 and \$4,000 are eligible to receive 75 percent of their balance in bill credits issued as a partial up-front credit and then monthly bill credits for up to eleven months, provided they continue to make payments as arranged. We have targeted this customer segment as having large enough arrears to be most at risk of permanently falling behind in their payments. The program will provide up to \$17.5 million in bill credits funded through an increase to the existing Low-Income Surcharge for a period of two years.²

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¹ In the Matter of an Inquiry into Utility Investments that May Assist in Minnesota's Economic Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic, Xcel Energy, Response and Petition – COVID-10 Relief & Recovery, Docket No. E,G999/CI-20-492 (Sept. 15, 2020) ("Xcel Response and Petition").

² Id. at Attachment D, Page 1.

On October 16, 2020, CUB filed comments in the Economic Recovery Docket recommending that the Commission and utilities proactively consider how economic development initiatives address inequities in Minnesota.³ Specifically, we recommended that the Commission prioritize approval and/or acceleration of initiatives that had a clear, measurable impact for those communities who are negatively affected by current and historical economic conditions that the investments seek to mitigate. Likewise, we recommended that the Commission decline to approve or accelerate projects that were likely to reinforce or contribute to existing inequities. Viewing Xcel's proposals in the Economic Recovery Docket through this lens, CUB identified the Payment Plan Credit Proposal as one that could have a measurable impact on ratepayers most in need of assistance without further contributing to inequities.⁴

On September 14, 2020, Xcel cross-filed a petition in the Economic Recovery Docket and Docket 20-760 for approval of various "Tranche 1" projects, including the Payment Plan Credit Proposal. Xcel contended that the Program would aid in Minnesota's economic recovery from the COVID-9 pandemic by helping customers who had fallen behind on their electric bills catch up, avoid falling further into arrears, and avoid disconnection upon expiration of a Commission-ordered suspension on disconnections.

In joint comments CUB and Energy CENTS Coalition filed on November 6, 2020, we applauded Xcel for developing the Program and, subject to a few recommendations, supported its approval.⁵ Our recommendations included the following:

- the Commission should require Xcel to share information in a future reporting period regarding Program participation as well as the number of customers who were excluded from participation by owing more than \$4,000 at the time the Program is implemented.
- when negotiating payment plan duration, customers should be allowed to spread payments out over the full 11 months or to make fewer payments in higher amounts, at their discretion.
 Customers should not be penalized for choosing to pay their balance off ahead of schedule;
- only customers who miss two consecutive payments should be disqualified from participating in the Program; and
- the Commission should establish a reporting process (based on the detailed contents we proposed) to allow the Commission and stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness of the Program

In an order issued March 12, 2021, the Commission determined that various projects Xcel proposed in the Economic Recovery Docket, including the Payment Plan Credit Program, "have the potential to

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³ In the Matter of an Inquiry into Utility Investments that May Assist in Minnesota's Economic Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic CUB Comments, Docket No. E,G999/CI-20-492 (Oct. 16, 2020).

⁴ Id. at 7.

⁵ In the Matter of an Xcel Payment Plan Credit Proposal, CUB and ECC Joint Comments, Docket No. E-002/M-20-760 (Nov. 6, 2020).

be consistent with the Commission's request for proposals that could assist with economic recovery" consistent with the Commission's prior order in that docket.⁶

On April 7, 2021, the Commission issued an order approving the Payment Plan Credit Program and establishing requirements for its implementation.⁷ The Commission's requirements generally included and adopted CUB's and ECC's recommendations. Also, as the Commission noted:

Xcel originally proposed to fund the program through an increase in the electric low-income energy discount surcharge for all customer classes. However, as a condition of the Commission's approval of Xcel's stay-out and true-up petition, the Commission accepted Xcel's commitment to bear the entire cost of the \$17.5 million Payment Plan Credit program. Thus, Xcel withdrew its request to recover the costs of this program from ratepayers.⁸

Subsequently, Xcel filed 4-, 9-, 15-, and 26-month status reports discussing the ongoing implementation of the Program.⁹ In its latest filing, Xcel reported that, as of June 30, 2023, it had applied or allocated approximately \$16.6 million (of the \$17.5 million total budget) to customer accounts, and that the Program had a remaining balance of \$855,405.¹⁰ The Company proposed to close the program by October 1, 2023 by taking the following steps¹¹:

- 1. close the Program to new participants;
- for existing Program participants on current payment plans as of August 30, 2023, apply to their account a lump sum equaling the remaining monthly installments scheduled for their account;
- 3. following the above lump sum payments, distribute all remaining Program funds in equal shares to each customer that participated in the Program;
- 4. provide a communication explaining the above steps to Program participants; and
- 5. submit a final report regarding Program completion on November 1, 2023.

Through its July 24, 2023 Notice of Comment Period, the Commission seeks comments on the following:

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⁶ In the Matter of an Inquiry into Utility Investments that May Assist in Minnesota's Economic Recovery From the COVID-19 Pandemic, Order Determining that Proposals Have the Potential to be Consistent with COVID-10 Economic Recovery, Docket No. E,G-999/CI-20-492 (March 12, 2021).

⁷ In the Matter of an Xcel Payment Plan Credit Proposal, Order Approving Payment Plan Credit Program, Docket No. E-002/M-20-760 (Apr. 7, 2021).

⁸ Id. (internal cites omitted).

⁹ See generally, Xcel filings in Docket No. E-002/M-20-760.

¹⁰ In the Matter of an Xcel Payment Plan Credit Proposal, 26-Month Status Report Payment Plan Credit Proposal, Docket No. E-002/M-20-760 (July 14, 2023), p. 2.

¹¹ Id. at. 4.

- 1) Has Xcel proposed a reasonable and equitable approach to distributing the remaining amount of \$855,405 from the Commission approved Xcel Payment Plan Credit Program amount of \$17.5 million, as currently filed?
- 2) Should the Program period for disbursement of all funds be extended until the funds are fully exhausted?
- 3) Should the remaining funds be deployed for use to other ratepayer-assistance programs, such as the Power-On program, etc.?
- 4) Are there other issues or concerns related to this matter?

III. Analysis

We, again, wish to express our appreciation to Xcel for implementing the Payment Plan Credit Program. We continue to believe it aligns with the Commission's goals in opening the Economic Recovery Docket, and that it helped some customers address and reduce arrearages and avoid disconnection. We also recognize and appreciate that Xcel funded this program using shareholder dollars.

Upon review of Xcel's 26-month report, we noted some concerns and questions. Namely, we were concerned that a majority of customers participating in the Program were disqualified before paying down the full amount of their arrearages. As Xcel reported:

To summarize, through June 2023, the Program has enrolled 17,229 customers, and on average the balance of enrolled customers has been reduced by \$1,568. At this time, 452 customers remain enrolled in the Program. An additional 3,788 customers have completed their arrangement and received the full benefit allotted to them. A total of 12,989 customers have been disqualified from the Program, primarily due to missing two consecutive payments. This total also includes customers who have stopped service with the Company and are no longer active customers. ¹²

We wondered why this was the case and/or if Xcel's experience managing this Program somehow informed its process, generally, for establishing and maintaining payment arrangements for customers in arrears.

We appreciate Xcel's willingness to talk through these questions prior to our submitting these comments. From those conversations, it is our understanding that most of those who dropped off/were disqualified from the Program had missed more than two payments. A smaller number of participants who dropped off the Program did so because they moved out of Xcel service territory while they were on it and/or shifted to other affordability programs for which they were eligible and that allowed for lower monthly payments. Xcel noted that a fair number of participants who dropped off the Program still paid down a significant portion of their arrears and were then able to pay off the

¹² In the Matter of an Xcel Payment Plan Credit Proposal, Xcel 26-Month Status Report, Docket No. E-002/M-20-760 (July 14, 2023).

rest (for some, including through qualification for Energy Assistance) to avoid disconnection. Though, some participants who did not make payments ultimately were disconnected.

Xcel also noted that managing this program was more administratively burdensome than more typical payment plan arrangements. It required Xcel staff to track individual participant accounts and make manual adjustments more often than when administering more traditional payment arrangements. Finally, Xcel noted that anyone who was removed from the Program was still eligible for other Xcel programs but could not reapply for this the Payment Plan Credit Program.

We believe Xcel has proposed a reasonable and equitable approach to distributing the remaining amount of \$855,405 from the Commission approved Xcel Payment Plan Credit Program, and we do not deem it necessary to extend the period for disbursements of all funds until the funds are exhausted. Should other parties recommend, and the Commission be persuaded, that the remaining funds should be deployed for use in other ratepayer-assistance programs, such as the Power-On program, we are not opposed to that approach.

IV. Conclusion

CUB respectfully recommends that the Commission:

- 1) accept Xcel's 26-month status report;
- approve Xcel's proposal for distributing the remaining amount of \$855,405 from the Commission approved Xcel Payment Plan Credit Program; (or, in the alternative, re-deploy remaining funds for use in other ratepayer-assistance programs, such as the Power-On program); and
- 3) not extend the Program period until the funds are fully exhausted.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely, August 18, 2023

/s/ Brian Edstrom
Brian Edstrom
Senior Regulatory Advocate
Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota
651-300-4701, ext. 6
briane@cubminnesota.org

cc: Service lists

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Michael	Ahern	ahern.michael@dorsey.co m	Dorsey & Whitney, LLP	50 S 6th St Ste 1500 Minneapolis, MN 554021498	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Kristine	Anderson	kanderson@greatermngas. com	Greater Minnesota Gas, Inc.& Greater MN Transmission, LLC	1900 Cardinal Lane PO Box 798 Faribault, MN 55021	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Alison C	Archer	aarcher@misoenergy.org	MISO	2985 Ames Crossing Rd Eagan, MN 55121	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
James J.	Bertrand	james.bertrand@stinson.co m	STINSON LLP	50 S 6th St Ste 2600 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
James	Canaday	james.canaday@ag.state. mn.us	Office of the Attorney General-RUD	Suite 1400 445 Minnesota St. St. Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Cody	Chilson	cchilson@greatermngas.co m	Greater Minnesota Gas, Inc. & Greater MN Transmission, LLC	1900 Cardinal Ln PO Box 798 Faribault, MN 55021	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Ray	Choquette	rchoquette@agp.com	Ag Processing Inc.	12700 West Dodge Road PO Box 2047 Omaha, NE 68103-2047	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
John	Coffman	john@johncoffman.net	AARP	871 Tuxedo Blvd. St, Louis, MO 63119-2044	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Generic Notice	Commerce Attorneys	commerce.attorneys@ag.st ate.mn.us	Office of the Attorney General-DOC	445 Minnesota Street Suite 1400 St. Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Hillary	Creurer	hcreurer@mnpower.com	Minnesota Power	30 W Superior St Duluth, MN 55802	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
George	Crocker	gwillc@nawo.org	North American Water Office	5093 Keats Avenue Lake Elmo, MN 55042	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Bridget	Dockter	Bridget.Dockter@xcelenerg y.com		N/A	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Michelle	Dreier	mdreier@electricalassociati on.com		N/A	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Brian	Edstrom	briane@cubminnesota.org	Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota	332 Minnesota St Ste W1360 Saint Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Ron	Elwood	relwood@mnlsap.org	Legal Services Advocacy Project	970 Raymond Avenue Suite G-40 Saint Paul, MN 55114	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
James C.	Erickson	jericksonkbc@gmail.com	Kelly Bay Consulting	17 Quechee St Superior, WI 54880-4421	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
John	Farrell	jfarrell@ilsr.org	Institute for Local Self-Reliance	2720 E. 22nd St Institute for Local Self- Reliance Minneapolis, MN 55406	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Eric	Fehlhaber	efehlhaber@dakotaelectric. com	Dakota Electric Association	4300 220th St W Farmington, MN 55024	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Sharon	Ferguson	sharon.ferguson@state.mn .us	Department of Commerce	85 7th Place E Ste 280 Saint Paul, MN 551012198	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Daryll	Fuentes	energy@usg.com	USG Corporation	550 W Adams St Chicago, IL 60661	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
James	Garness	james.r.garness@xcelener gy.com		N/A	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Edward	Garvey	edward.garvey@AESLcons ulting.com	AESL Consulting	32 Lawton St Saint Paul, MN 55102-2617	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Bruce	Gerhardson	bgerhardson@otpco.com	Otter Tail Power Company	PO Box 496 215 S Cascade St Fergus Falls, MN 565380496	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Anita	Grace	anita@gracemulticultural.c om	GRACE Multicltural	12959 196th LN NW Elk River, MN 55330	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Todd J.	Guerrero	todd.guerrero@kutakrock.c om	Kutak Rock LLP	Suite 1750 220 South Sixth Stree Minneapolis, MN 554021425	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Adam	Heinen	aheinen@dakotaelectric.co m	Dakota Electric Association	4300 220th St W Farmington, MN 55024	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Annete	Henkel	mui@mnutilityinvestors.org	Minnesota Utility Investors	413 Wacouta Street #230 St.Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Corey	Hintz	chintz@dakotaelectric.com	Dakota Electric Association	4300 220th Street Farmington, MN 550249583	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Michael	Норре	lu23@ibew23.org	Local Union 23, I.B.E.W.	445 Etna Street Ste. 61 St. Paul, MN 55106	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
MJ	Horner	mj.horner@xcelenergy.com		N/A	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Lori	Hoyum	lhoyum@mnpower.com	Minnesota Power	30 West Superior Street Duluth, MN 55802	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Travis	Jacobson	travis.jacobson@mdu.com	Great Plains Natural Gas Company	400 N 4th St Bismarck, ND 58501	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Alan	Jenkins	aj@jenkinsatlaw.com	Jenkins at Law	2950 Yellowtail Ave. Marathon, FL 33050	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Richard	Johnson	Rick.Johnson@lawmoss.co m	Moss & Barnett	150 S. 5th Street Suite 1200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Sarah	Johnson Phillips	sarah.phillips@stoel.com	Stoel Rives LLP	33 South Sixth Street Suite 4200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Nick	Kaneski	nick.kaneski@enbridge.co m	Enbridge Energy Company, Inc.	11 East Superior St Ste 125 Duluth, MN 55802	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Michael	Krikava	mkrikava@taftlaw.com	Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP	2200 IDS Center 80 S 8th St Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Nicolle	Kupser	nkupser@greatermngas.co m	Greater Minnesota Gas, Inc. & Greater MN Transmission, LLC	1900 Cardinal Ln PO Box 798 Faribault, MN 55021	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Peder	Larson	plarson@larkinhoffman.co m	Larkin Hoffman Daly & Lindgren, Ltd.	8300 Norman Center Drive Suite 1000 Bloomington, MN 55437	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
James D.	Larson	james.larson@avantenergy .com	Avant Energy Services	220 S 6th St Ste 1300 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Annie	Levenson Falk	annielf@cubminnesota.org	Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota	332 Minnesota Street, Suite W1360 St. Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Ryan	Long	ryan.j.long@xcelenergy.co m	Xcel Energy	414 Nicollet Mall 401 8th Floor Minneapolis, MN 55401	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Jason	Loos	jason.loos@centerpointene rgy.com	CenterPoint Energy Resources Corp.	505 Nicollet Mall 3rd Floor Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Susan	Ludwig	sludwig@mnpower.com	Minnesota Power	30 West Superior Street Duluth, MN 55802	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Kavita	Maini	kmaini@wi.rr.com	KM Energy Consulting, LLC	961 N Lost Woods Rd Oconomowoc, WI 53066	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Pam	Marshall	pam@energycents.org	Energy CENTS Coalition	823 E 7th St St Paul, MN 55106	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Joseph	Meyer	joseph.meyer@ag.state.mn .us	Office of the Attorney General-RUD	Bremer Tower, Suite 1400 445 Minnesota Street St Paul, MN 55101-2131	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Stacy	Miller	stacy.miller@minneapolism n.gov	City of Minneapolis	350 S. 5th Street Room M 301 Minneapolis, MN 55415	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
David	Moeller	dmoeller@allete.com	Minnesota Power	30 W Superior St Duluth, MN 558022093	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Andrew	Moratzka	andrew.moratzka@stoel.co m	Stoel Rives LLP	33 South Sixth St Ste 4200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
David	Niles	david.niles@avantenergy.c om	Minnesota Municipal Power Agency	220 South Sixth Street Suite 1300 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Samantha	Norris	samanthanorris@alliantene rgy.com	Interstate Power and Light Company	200 1st Street SE PO Box 351 Cedar Rapids, IA 524060351	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Matthew	Olsen	molsen@otpco.com	Otter Tail Power Company	215 South Cascade Street Fergus Falls, MN 56537	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Carol A.	Overland	overland@legalectric.org	Legalectric - Overland Law Office	1110 West Avenue Red Wing, MN 55066	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
John	Pacheco	johnpachecojr@gmail.com		N/A	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Greg	Palmer	gpalmer@greatermngas.co m	Greater Minnesota Gas, Inc. & Greater MN Transmission, LLC	1900 Cardinal Ln PO Box 798 Faribault, MN 55021	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Jose	Perez	jose@hispanicsinenergy.co m	Hispanics in Energy	1017 L Street #719 Sacramento, CA 95814	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Jennifer	Peterson	jjpeterson@mnpower.com	Minnesota Power	30 West Superior Street Duluth, MN 55802	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Catherine	Phillips	Catherine.Phillips@wecene rgygroup.com	Minnesota Energy Resources	231 West Michigan St Milwaukee, WI 53203	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Kevin	Pranis	kpranis@liunagroc.com	Laborers' District Council of MN and ND	81 E Little Canada Road St. Paul, Minnesota 55117	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Generic Notice	Residential Utilities Division	residential.utilities@ag.stat e.mn.us	Office of the Attorney General-RUD	1400 BRM Tower 445 Minnesota St St. Paul, MN 551012131	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Kevin	Reuther	kreuther@mncenter.org	MN Center for Environmental Advocacy	26 E Exchange St, Ste 206 St. Paul, MN 551011667	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Susan	Romans	sromans@allete.com	Minnesota Power	30 West Superior Street Legal Dept Duulth, MN 55802	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Elizabeth	Schmiesing	eschmiesing@winthrop.co m	Winthrop & Weinstine, P.A.	225 South Sixth Street Suite 3500 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Lori	Schultz	lorischultz@minncap.org	Minnesota Community Action Partnership	MCIT Building 100 Empire Dr Ste 20 St. Paul, MN 55103	Electronic Service 2	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Christine	Schwartz	Regulatory.records@xcele nergy.com	Xcel Energy	414 Nicollet Mall FL 7 Minneapolis, MN 554011993	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Will	Seuffert	Will.Seuffert@state.mn.us	Public Utilities Commission	121 7th PI E Ste 350 Saint Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Janet	Shaddix Elling	jshaddix@janetshaddix.co m	Shaddix And Associates	7400 Lyndale Ave S Ste 190 Richfield, MN 55423	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Colleen	Sipiorski	Colleen.Sipiorski@wecener gygroup.com	Minnesota Energy Resources Corporation	700 North Adams St Green Bay, WI 54307	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Ken	Smith	ken.smith@districtenergy.com	District Energy St. Paul Inc.	76 W Kellogg Blvd St. Paul, MN 55102	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Peggy	Sorum	peggy.sorum@centerpointe nergy.com	CenterPoint Energy	505 Nicollet Mall Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Jamez	Staples	jstaples@renewablenrgpart ners.com	Renewable Energy Partners	3033 Excelsior Blvd S Minneapolis, MN 55416	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Byron E.	Starns	byron.starns@stinson.com	STINSON LLP	50 S 6th St Ste 2600 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Richard	Stasik	richard.stasik@wecenergyg roup.com	Minnesota Energy Resources Corporation (HOLDING)	231 West Michigan St - P321 Milwaukee, WI 53203	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Kristin	Stastny	kstastny@taftlaw.com	Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP	2200 IDS Center 80 South 8th St Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Cary	Stephenson	cStephenson@otpco.com	Otter Tail Power Company	215 South Cascade Street Fergus Falls, MN 56537	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
James M	Strommen	jstrommen@kennedy- graven.com	Kennedy & Graven, Chartered	150 S 5th St Ste 700 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Eric	Swanson	eswanson@winthrop.com	Winthrop & Weinstine	225 S 6th St Ste 3500 Capella Tower Minneapolis, MN 554024629	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Stuart	Tommerdahl	stommerdahl@otpco.com	Otter Tail Power Company	215 S Cascade St PO Box 496 Fergus Falls, MN 56537	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Analeisha	Vang	avang@mnpower.com	Minnesota Power	30 W Superior St Duluth, MN 558022093	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Samantha	Williams	swilliams@nrdc.org	Natural Resources Defense Council	20 N. Wacker Drive Ste 1600 Chicago, IL 60606	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Joseph	Windler	jwindler@winthrop.com	Winthrop & Weinstine	225 South Sixth Street, Suite 3500 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Kurt	Zimmerman	kwz@ibew160.org	Local Union #160, IBEW	2909 Anthony Ln St Anthony Village, MN 55418-3238	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official
Patrick	Zomer	Pat.Zomer@lawmoss.com	Moss & Barnett PA	150 S 5th St #1200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_20-760_Official