



July 11, 2016

Mr. Daniel Wolf Executive Secretary Minnesota Public Utilities Commission 121 Seventh Place East, Suite 350 St. Paul, MN 55101-2147

RE: CenterPoint Energy Reply Comments to Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources

Docket No. G008/M-16-366

Dear Mr. Wolf:

CenterPoint Energy (the Company) respectfully submits the following Reply Comments in response to the June 28, 2016 *Comments* of the Minnesota Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources (DER) regarding the Company's 2015 Conservation Improvement Program Status Report, 2015 Demand Side Management Financial Incentive, Conservation Improvement Program Tracker Report, and 2015 Conservation Cost Recovery Adjustment Aggregated Compliance Filing (Petition).

The Company has reviewed the DER's *Comments* and supports DER Staff's recommendations that the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (the Commission) approve the Company's proposed 2015 Demand Side Management (DSM) financial incentive in the amount of \$12,732,019 and approve CenterPoint Energy's 2015 Conservation Improvement Program (CIP) Tracker Account as summarized in Table 1 of DER Staff's *Comments*.

As discussed in more detail below, the Company does not support the DER Staff's recommendation pertaining to the Company's requested 2017 Conservation Cost Recovery Adjustment (CCRA) or the DER Staff's recommendation to deny the Company's request to adjust its 2015 CIP Tracker Account to reflect the interim short-term cost of debt that was in effect starting in October of 2015. The Company supports the bill message language provided in DER Staff's Comments; however, does not support the CCRA amount provided therein.

2017 CCRA Request

As discussed on page 43 of the *Petition*, the Company received approval of a 2016 budget that includes an extraordinarily large custom rebate project. The project has a sizable impact on the Company's 2016 CIP energy savings goals and budget. Due to the high energy savings goal associated with this project, the Company also anticipates a one-time spike in the corresponding DSM financial incentive and thus in recoverable CIP expenses in the year that the associated financial incentive is booked – forecasted for 2017. As a result, an increase in the CCRA rate is needed to recover those expenses. Because the increase in CIP expenses is expected to be a one-time event, the Company proposed implementing a CCRA rate in 2017 that is forecasted to amortize recovery of the CIP Tracker Account over the course of two years. Amortizing recovery over two years would avoid a sharp spike in rates for one year (2017), followed by a sharp decrease the following year, which would occur if the CIP Tracker Account were

recovered fully in 2017. The Company prefers the two-year amortization approach over recovering the full CIP Tracker balance in one year because it avoids dramatic fluctuations in the conservation recovery rate from year to year. Such fluctuations can result in higher customer dissatisfaction and increased customer confusion.

DER Staff recommended in the June 28th Comments that the Commission not accept the Company's requested CCRA rate. DER Staff recommend that the Commission approve a CCRA rate that will fully recover the Company's CIP Tracker balance in 2017, citing the goals of "recovering charges as close to the incurred date as possible" to ensure that current ratepayers bear current costs and "minimizing customer carrying costs."¹

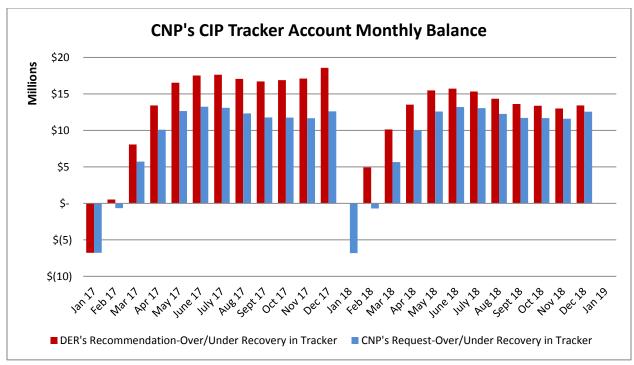
First, the Company believes that recovering the CIP Tracker Account balance fully over two years will result in minimal risk of new customers bearing a significant portion of CIP expenses incurred in the previous year. The Company typically adds approximately one percent in new customers annually. Therefore, fully recovering the CIP Tracker balance in 2017 might relieve a small number of new customers in 2018 from paying toward the previous year's CIP expenses, but would result in an avoidable one-time spike in rates for the vast majority of the Company's customers in 2017. Further, the oscillating nature of the DER's recommendation could result in significant customer dissatisfaction and potential confusion as rates would increase in 2017, only to drop again in 2018.

In general, the Company agrees with the DER's stated goal of "recovering charges as close to the incurred date as possible." However, compared to the Company's proposal to recover costs over two years, the DER's recommended approach would not recover charges closer to when they were incurred. Instead, the DER's recommended approach results in early recovery of expenses in order to off-set the spike in CIP expenses that is forecasted to occur in the fourth quarter of 2017. Due to the cyclical nature of CIP expenses, which typically peak in the last few months of the calendar year, it is common for the Company's CIP Tracker Account to over-recover in the first part of the year in order to off-set fourth quarter expenses. However, the DER's recommended 2017 CCRA results in far higher over-recovery of conservation costs for the majority of 2017 than the Company's requested approach. As shown in the graph below, the DER's recommended 2017 CCRA (forecasted in red) over-recovers CIP expenses through November to a greater degree than the Company's requested 2017 CCRA (forecasted in blue). In other words, the DER's recommended CCRA would have the Company collect conservation costs earlier and hold on to larger amounts of ratepayer dollars than the Company's requested approach.

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¹ June 28, 2016 Comments in Docket No. G008/M-16-366, page 9

² June 28, 2016 Comments in Docket No. G008/M-16-366, page 9



*For clarity, the graph above shows an over-recovery of the CIP Tracker Account as a positive dollar amount. In the previously filed *Petition*, an over-recovered CIP Tracker Account balance was shown as a negative dollar amount.

Finally, the Company challenges the DER's assertion that their recommended CCRA rate would minimize carrying charges. It is important to remember that carrying charges in the CIP Tracker Account are calculated monthly and not solely on the year-end balance. Carrying costs can be both due from and payable to customers – carrying charges are due from customers when the Company has not fully recovered the CIP costs and carrying charges are payable to customers when the company has recovered from customers before the CIP costs are incurred. Because the Company's requested CCRA rate recovers costs more closely to the date that costs are incurred, it results in carrying charges that are less in absolute value than DER Staff's recommendation. The DER's recommendation results in a projected total of -\$237,828 in carrying charges over the two years (2017 and 2018), while the Company's requested CCRA rate results in a projected total of -\$173,653 over the same two-year period.

Therefore, the Company respectfully requests that the Commission approve its initial 2017 CCRA request of \$0.01553 per therm, which reflects a two-year amortization approach of recovering the CIP Tracker balance. This CCRA amount will maintain more consistent and stable conservation recovery rates over the next two years; it will result in timely recovery of conservation costs; and it will result in lower carrying charges than would a one-year recovery.

Carrying Charges Applied to the CIP Tracker Account

Due to the specific language of the Commission's December 17, 2014 *Order*, the Company did not update the short-term cost of debt rate to calculate carrying charges on the CIP Tracker Account at the time interim rates were implemented.³ Instead, the Company used the approved short-term cost of

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³ Docket No. G008/GR-15-424

debt from the 2013 rate case⁴ to calculate carrying charges. To avoid future misalignment between the CIP Tracker Account and effective rates for a given period, the Company requested in its April 29, 2016 *Petition* that the Commission allow the Company to update the short-term cost of debt in the CIP Tracker Account upon future changes in rates to be consistent with the Company's effective short-term cost of debt for the given period. The Company also requested that the Commission allow the Company to book an adjustment to the CIP Tracker Account in 2016 that would "true-up" the CIP Tracker Account to what it would have been if the Company had implemented the interim short-term cost of debt at the effective date of interim rates.

Commission approval of these requests would allow the Company to "true-up" the CIP Tracker Account for the interim short-term cost of debt as well as update the short-term cost of debt at the effective date of final rates in its 2015 rate case⁵ and book the associated adjustment to address the difference between the interim short-term cost of debt rate and the final short-term cost of debt rate during the test year period. Given the timing of the rate case proceeding, the Company could make one adjustment, instead of the two adjustments discussed above (one to account for the interim short-term cost of debt during the test year and another to account for what carrying charges should have been at the final short-term cost of debt in the test year). This single adjustment could happen at the time of final rates and would account for the final, approved short-term cost of debt starting at the beginning of the test year period. The single adjustment would result in the same outcome in the CIP Tracker Account as the double adjustment option. Either way, the CIP Tracker Account would be adjusted by an amount that would make carrying charges equal to the amount they would be had the final short-term cost of debt been in place starting in October of 2015 (the beginning of the test year).

In the June 28, 2016 *Comments* by the DER, Staff recommend that the Commission deny the Company's request. Instead, DER Staff recommend that the Commission order the Company to update the short-term cost of debt on June of 2016 to the short-term cost of debt rate that was recently approved in the Company's 2015 rate case. This action would not use the appropriate short-term cost of debt during the test year period and would not allow the Company to keep the short-term cost of debt up-to-date with future rate changes.

The Company believes that the CIP Tracker Account should reflect currently effective rates for any given time period in order to appropriately calculate recovery of the Company's CIP expenses. The Company's proposal to make an adjustment to the CIP Tracker Account to account for final rates in the test year is consistent with longstanding practice, as explained in the Commission's Order in the Company's 1992 rate case:

The statutory interim rate scheme means that there is no Commission determination of actual utility revenue requirement at the time of setting interim rates. The formula is meant to stand as a temporary proxy for eventual Commission scrutiny, and to protect utilities from financial harm in the meantime.

At the time of the Commission's final rate case decision, the utility's revenue requirement is determined. This is the level that is applied in the rate case, and the interim rate formula is superseded.

⁵ Docket No. G008/GR-15-424

⁴ Docket No. G008/GR-13-316

The Minnesota rate case statute thus clearly contemplates a final determination of revenue requirement and rates which is applied retroactively to the point at which rates had first been adjusted [emphasis added] on an interim basis.⁶

Once final rates are approved and implemented, the Company recalculates revenue recovery and carrying charges during the test year using the final, approved rates. An adjustment is made to the CIP Tracker Account to account for the difference between interim and final rates – in this way the tracker reflects final rates at the start of the test year. As a part of the general rate case process, the Company provides a compliance filing that includes calculations of the difference between revenues collected during the time interim rates were in place and revenues that would have been collected under final approved rates, as well as the accounting entry that will be applied to the CIP Tracker Account to address that difference.⁷

The Company believes that the CIP Tracker Account should not deviate from the rates and timing set forth in a general rate case. A general rate case procedure is where the Commission thoroughly reviews and establishes rates. Therefore, the Company requested that the Commission approve its April 29, 2016 request to adjust the CIP Tracker Account to reflect interim short-term cost of debt for the interim rate period starting in October of 2015 and allow the Company to update its short-term cost of debt in the CIP Tracker Account upon future changes in rates. However, given timing considerations, the Company now proposes to forego the initial adjustment (to reflect the interim short-term cost of debt) and instead calculate the "true-up" adjustment based on the final, approved short-term cost of debt at the start of the test year. This adjustment would occur at implementation of final rates; the short-term cost of debt rate would then also be updated in the CIP Tracker Account at that time to reflect the final short-term cost of debt approved in the Company's 2015 rate case. This method would reduce the number of adjustments to the CIP Tracker Account, while arriving at the same outcome as the methodology requested previously in the Company's April 29, 2016 Petition.

CenterPoint Energy Requests

In summary, the Company requests that the Commission:

- 1. approve the Company's requested 2015 DSM financial incentive of \$12,732,019;
- 2. approve the Company's 2015 CIP Tracker Account as summarized on page 40 of the Company's April 29, 2016 aggregated filing;
- 3. approve the Company's requested CCRA rate of \$0.01553 per therm, effective on January 1, 2017;
- 4. allow the Company to apply an adjustment to its 2016 CIP Tracker Account to account for the final short-term cost of debt rate from its 2015 rate case, starting in October of 2015;
- 5. allow the Company to calculate carrying charges on the CIP Tracker Account balance using the Company's effective short-term cost of debt for the applicable period; and
- 6. approve the Company's requested bill message as stated on page 45 of the Company's April 29, 2016 aggregated filing.

⁶ December 29, 1993 *Order* Rejecting Accounting Treatment in Compliance Filings in Docket No. G008/GR-92-400 starting at page 8.

⁷ See the December 10, 2014 CIP Tracker Compliance Filing made in Docket G008/GR-13-316.

The Company appreciates the opportunity to offer these Reply Comments. Please contact me at 612-321-4318 or audrey.partridge@centerpointenergy.com with any questions.

Sincerely,

/s/ Audrey C. Partridge

Audrey C. Partridge Senior Regulatory Analyst, Conservation Improvement Program C: Service List

AFFIDAVIT OF SERVICE

STATE OF MINNESOTA)
COUNTY OF HENNEPIN)
Audrey C. Partridge, being first duly sworn on oath, deposes and says that she is an employee in the office of CenterPoint Energy, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55402, and that on the 11 th day of July 2016, she delivered the enclosed notice of filing to those individuals and agencies listed on the attached pages, by:
<u>x</u> placing such notice in envelopes, properly addressed with postage paid, and depositing the same in the United States Mail at Minneapolis, Minnesota, for delivery by the United States Post Office,
personal service,
express mail,
delivery service,
x electronic filing.
/s/_Audrey C. Partridge Audrey C. Partridge
Subscribed and sworn to before me this 11 th day of July 2016.
_/s/ Mary Jo Schuh
Mary Jo Schuh Notary Public (Commission Expires January 31, 2020)

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