COMMERCE DEPARTMENT

September 15, 2017

Daniel P. Wolf Executive Secretary Minnesota Public Utilities Commission 121 7th Place East, Suite 350 St. Paul, Minnesota 55101

RE: **Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources** Docket No. E002/M-17-527

Dear Mr. Wolf:

Attached are the comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources (Department) in the following matter:

Northern States Power Company d/b/a Xcel Energy's Petition for Approval of a Customer Access Joint Pilot Program.

The Petition was filed on June 30, 2017 by:

Aakash H. Chandarana Regional Vice President, Rates and Regulatory Affairs Xcel Energy 414 Nicollet Mall Minneapolis, MN 55401

The Department recommends that the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (Commission) **The Department recommends approval with additional reporting requirements** the request. The Department is available to respond to any questions the Commission may have on this matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ SUSAN L. PEIRCE Public Utility Rates Analyst Coordinator

SLP/ja Attachment



Before the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission

Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce Division of Energy Resources

Docket No. E002/M-17-527

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In its September 6, 2016 Order in Docket No. E002/M-13-867¹, the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (Commission) directed Northern States Power Company, doing business as Xcel Energy (Xcel or the Company) to "develop a community solar garden proposal or proposals specifically for low-income customers, applying LIHEAP eligibility standards, and file the proposal(s) by March 1, 2017."

On March 1, 2017, the Company and the Energy CENTS Coalition (ECC) filed a concept proposal for a joint pilot program to pair energy efficiency investments and solar garden participation. On June 30, 2017, the Company filed its request for approval of its Rehabilitation and Efficiency: Neighborhood Energy Works (RENEWs) Pilot program.

II. SUMMARY OF PROPOSED RENEWS PILOT PROJECT

Xcel proposes to partner with ECC, Dayton's Bluff Neighborhood Housing Association, and the Center for Energy and the Environment to provide Xcel customers in the Railroad Island neighborhood of St. Paul with a combined energy efficiency and community solar garden (CSG) subscription outreach program. The energy efficiency component will be offered during the first three years of the program, and provide a Home Energy Squad or Low Income Home Energy Squad visit for neighborhood residents. The Energy Squad visit will be used to provide energy efficiency opportunities to residents and to qualify them for participation in the CSG. Qualifying criteria for participation the RENEWs program is the same as eligibility for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) participation. Eligibility for LIHEAP will be determined through the process administered by the Department. Xcel estimates the budget for its energy efficiency piece to be approximately \$1.8 million. The Company plans to seek approval through its Conservation Improvement Program (CIP) upon Commission approval of the RENEWs program.

¹ In the Matter of the Petition of Northern States Power Company, dba Xcel Energy, for Approval of its Proposed Community Solar Garden Program, Order Approving Value of Solar Rate for Xcel's Solar Garden Program, Clarifying Program Parameters and Requiring Further Filings, Docket No. E002/M-13-867, September 6, 2016.

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Xcel is negotiating for the development of a 0.5 MW-CSG with THOR Construction who will handle garden development through the interconnection process. Xcel proposes to take ownership of the CSG upon completion, and will seek approval from the Commission of final contract terms. The Home Energy Squad visit will be used to qualify potential CSG subscribers. Subscriptions will be offered to qualifying subscribers in increments of 200 watts and up to 120 percent of the customer's average annual energy use. Xcel proposes to offer subscriptions without a credit check, no enrollment or cancellation fees, and a subscription term of up to five-years, rather than 25-year subscription period typically offered by CSGs. Xcel proposes to credit subscribers the difference between the Value of Solar rate (VoS) and the cost of the resource and program administration. Initially, subscribers will receive a net bill credit of \$0.005 per kWh. Future bill credits may vary with modifications to the VoS rate. Unsubscribed energy will be retained at the tariffed avoided cost rate. Xcel will recover the costs of the bill credits and unsubscribed energy payments through the fuel clause adjustment (FCA) as it does for other CSGs.

Xcel intends to contract with Energy CENTS Coalition to identify and recruit eligible participants and to manage subscriptions, as well as provide energy efficiency services. The Company states it will submit an annual report to subscribers, and post the report online. In addition, the Company proposes to file an annual report with the Commission detailing the following information

- 1. Total number of subscribers;
- 2. Total garden production;
- 3. Total bill credits provided;
- 4. Rate of subscription uptake;
- 5. An evaluation of its outreach strategies, and modifications to ensure CSG access
- 6. The impact of energy efficiency measures installed;
- 7. Program costs including administrative, outreach, equipment and delivery labor costs;
- 8. Identification and reporting on non-energy benefits to the neighborhood;
- 9. Identification of drivers and barriers to low-income participation in CSGs; and
- 10. Opportunities for energy efficiency improvements or new technologies that could yield more cost-effective energy savings.

III. DEPARTMENT ANALYSIS

The Commission's September 6, 2016 Order directed Xcel to develop and file a CSG proposal for low income customers. A number of barriers exist to low income customer participation in a CSG. Specifically, credit score requirements, long subscription periods and upfront or other fees make participation difficult, if not impossible for many low-income customers. Xcel's proposal addresses many of these barriers by eliminating the credit score requirements and upfront fees, and reducing the subscription periods. More importantly, in the Department's

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view, the Company combines CSG subscriptions with efforts to address energy usage by lowincome households through customers' participation in a Home Energy Squad or Low Income Home Energy Squad visit to address energy usage and help residents lower their overall electric bills. CSG participation alone may provide a subscriber with a modest bill credit; however, by first addressing energy efficiency concerns, the program stands to save participants additional money by reducing their usage.

Minn. Stat. 216B.1641 [the CSG Statute] sets out the requirements for CSGs. The statute permits public utilities and other entities to own and operate CSGs. The statute requires that CSG subscriptions be at least 200 watts of the CSGs capacity, and that no subscription be more than 120 percent of a subscriber's annual average consumption. Xcel's proposal complies with the statutory requirements. In addition, the proposed program complies with the Commission's September 6, 2016 Orders² by using the Value of Solar as the basis for determining subscriber bill credits.

Two commenters raised concerns about the Company's proposal to offer a single line item net bill credit on customer bills. Commenters³ continue to advocate for separate listing of the bill credit and subscription rate so that customers are aware of the subscriber fee, as they are for non-utility CSGs, and can "comparison shop" for other solar gardens. The commenters also noted that non-utility CSG developers do not have the ability to use on-bill collection, which raises anti-competitive concerns. The Department concludes that providing a single line item on-bill credit for low-income subscribers is a simple, reasonable method for handling billing for the RENEWs pilot. The Commission may wish to direct Xcel and the developers to address on-bill repayment for developer gardens; however, the Department recommends this project be approved. The Department does not expect that, should on-bill repayment be available to non-utility CSG developers, the benefits of on-bill repayment would be sufficient to overcome the additional risk of subscribing low-income customers by non-utility solar developers.

Because Xcel proposes to offer an energy efficiency component with participation in the CSG, the Department recommends the addition of reporting requirements consistent with the type of reporting typically required by the CIP program. Specifically, the Department recommends that the following metrics be added for each program year:

- Estimated annual energy savings for the program (weather normalized) (MWh)
- Estimated annual energy savings for each subscriber (weather normalized) (kWh)

² Id.

³ See the August 15, 2017 Comments submitted by Clean Energy Access Coalition and the August 16, 2017 Initial Comments submitted by the Joint Commenters (Cooperative Energy Futures, Minnesota Solar Connection, and Novel Energy Solutions/Minnesota Community Solar)

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• Actual bill savings benefits that accrued to participants (the difference between what participants would have paid for electricity had they not participated in the CSG and the amount paid under the program.

The Department concludes that Xcel's proposed RENEWS Solar*Rewards Program is reasonable, and recommends approval with the additional reporting requirements.

IV. SUMMARY OF DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION

The Department recommends that the Commission approve Xcel's RENEWs Solar*Rewards Program and direct the Company to report the following information on an annual basis:

- 1. Total number of subscribers;
- 2. Total garden production;
- 3. Total bill credits provided;
- 4. Rate of subscription uptake;
- 5. An evaluation of its outreach strategies, and modifications to ensure CSG access
- 6. The impact of energy efficiency measures installed;
- 7. Program costs including administrative, outreach, equipment and delivery labor costs;
- 8. Identification and reporting on non-energy benefits to the neighborhood;
- 9. Identification of drivers and barriers to low-income participation in CSGs; and
- 10. Opportunities for energy efficiency improvements or new technologies that could yield more cost-effective energy savings.
- 11. Estimated annual energy savings for the program (weather normalized) (MWh)
- 12. Estimated annual energy savings for each subscriber (weather normalized) (kWh)
- 13. Actual bill savings benefits that accrued to participants (the difference between what participants would have paid for electricity had they not participated in the CSG and the amount paid under the program.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Linda Chavez, hereby certify that I have this day served copies of the following document on the attached list of persons by electronic filing, e-mail, or by depositing a true and correct copy thereof properly enveloped with postage paid in the United States Mail at St. Paul, Minnesota.

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE – COMMENTS

Docket Nos. E002/M-17-527

Dated this 15th day of September, 2017.

/s/Linda Chavez

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