



November 6, 2017

—Via Electronic Filing—

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

RE: REPLY COMMENTS

AFFILIATED INTEREST REQUEST DOCKET No. E002/AI-17-577

Dear Mr. Wolf:

Northern States Power Company, doing business as Xcel Energy, submits the enclosed Reply Comments in response to the comments received from the Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources and the Office of the Attorney General – Residential Utilities and Antitrust Division.

We have electronically filed this document with the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission, and copies have been served on the parties on the attached service list. Please contact me at amy.a.liberkowski@xcelenergy.com or (612) 330-6613 if you have any questions regarding this filing.

Sincerely,

/s/

AMY A. LIBERKOWSKI
DIRECTOR, REGULATORY PRICING AND ANALYSIS

Enclosure c: Service List

STATE OF MINNESOTA BEFORE THE MINNESOTA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

Nancy Lange Chair
Dan Lipschultz Commissioner
Matthew Schuerger Commissioner
Katie J. Sieben Commissioner
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IN THE MATTER OF NORTHERN STATES POWER COMPANY'S AFFILIATED INTEREST REQUEST AND INFORMATIONAL FILING DOCKET NO. E002/AI-17-577

REPLY COMMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Northern States Power Company, doing business as Xcel Energy, submits this Reply to the October 24, 2017 Comments of the Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources(the Department) and the October 25, 2017 Comments of the Office of the Attorney General – Residential Utilities and Antitrust Division (OAG).

In this Reply, we respond to the Department of Commerce, who recommended approval with modifications. The Company also responds to the OAG's comments.

REPLY

I. THE DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDS APPROVAL

The Department recommends approval of the use of the Interconnection Agreement and Standard Contract for the Solar*Rewards Community program (the SRC Program) projects set to be purchased by Company affiliate Nicollet Projects I LLC (Nicollet Projects) from New Energy Equity, LLC (NEE). The Department also recommends approval, with modifications, of the Administrative Service Agreement (ASA) between Xcel Energy Services Inc. (XES) and Nicollet Projects.

We appreciate the Department's thorough review of our proposal. After reviewing our initial Petition and issuing discovery, the Department concluded that our proposal complied with the requirements under Minnesota law, and that the contracts were reasonable and in the public interest. It also concluded that the Company's protections to ensure non-discriminatory treatment were reasonable and supported.

In regards to the Department's recommendation to include information in our annual compliance filings, we will provide all the documentation requested in our annual compliance filings. This includes documentation that all cost allocations are consistent with past Commission Order and also a comparison of the actual amounts allocated to Nicollet Projects to the estimated costs provided in our response to Department Information Request No. 3.

With respect to cost allocation, the ASA and the Company's financial accounting will proceed as described in our response to Department Information Request No. 3.

However, for ratemaking purposes, the Company applies a regulatory adjustment consistent with the Commission's March 25, 2011 Erratum Notice Order, in the Cost Allocation Procedures and General Allocator docket, Ordering Paragraph 1, which the DOC referenced in its comments. The Order states:

The Company shall change the formula for the general allocator and for all allocators in which it uses number of employees to substitute Allocated Labor Hours with Overtime in place of Number of Employees.

This regulatory adjustment implements the compliance sought by the Department for the State of Minnesota without disrupting the accounting methods and agreements that govern cost flows across Xcel Energy and its other jurisdictions. The Company applied this adjustment in each of its last three Minnesota rate cases in order to comply with the Commission's order:

- Docket No. E002/GR-12-961, Heuer Direct, page 81.
- Docket No. E002/GR-13-868, Heuer Direct, page 137-138.
- Docket No. E002/GR-15-826, Heuer Direct, page 90-91.

Because of this regulatory adjustment in rate cases, the Company believes alterations to the ASA specific to the State of Minnesota are unneeded.

II. OAG COMMENTS

The OAG recommends rejection of our Petition because they believe it is not within the public interest, that it will provide the Company with a competitive advantage, and would create new financial incentives for the Company within the Community Solar Garden (CSG) program. The Company disagrees with the OAG's reasoning, as there are program safeguards in place to ensure a fair process.

The arguments related to process fairness raised by the OAG in their Comments were addressed by the Company in our responses to Department Information Requests. The Department asked several questions to gather further information about the Nicollet Projects proposal. We responded to the Department's requests and provided them with more detail on the Nicollet Projects proposal, as highlighted below. After reviewing our responses, the Department recommended approval of our proposal.

The OAG also asserts the existence of a financial conflict of interest. We disagree with this assertion, as discussed here.

A. The Process is Sound and Ensures Fairness

As our Petition and responses to Department Information Requests make clear, Nicollet Projects is not handling the interconnection and siting process or the customer-facing, subscriber recruitment process. Both processes have safeguards in place to ensure that Nicollet Projects does not gain advantages over other participants due to its relationship to the Company. Further, because Nicollet Projects is an offtaker of completed projects, not a developer, the OAG's concerns are misplaced.

1. Interconnection Process Safeguards

The projects subject to the purchase agreement with Nicollet Projects have not received any preferential treatment in the siting and interconnection process. NEE began the development of these projects on their own accord and initiated the interconnection process before entering into an agreement with Nicollet Projects.

The Department inquired about assistance given by the Company to NEE during the development of these projects in their Information Request No. 4, asking:

Is the price for solar projects being purchased by Nicollet lower as a result of helping the developer (New Energy Equity LLC) with anything, including but not limited to solar gardens and interconnections? Please support your response.

The Company response to the question was:

No. Neither Xcel Energy nor Nicollet Projects has assisted NEE in the development of the projects. The siting and interconnection responsibilities are managed by NEE. The developer is incurring the same costs for interconnection and distribution system upgrades as any other developer would

for a project with the same attributes participating in the program. The interconnection and/or development costs are not affected by the fact that the projects eventually will be owned by an Xcel Energy affiliate. Accordingly, the purchase price was not lower given that we did not provide project development assistance to the developer.

The Department more generally inquired about safeguards that will ensure that all CSG projects will not receive treatment and information not available to other developers in their Information Request No. 4, asking:

Please explain all safeguards Xcel will use to ensure that it does not treat Nicollet [P]rojects in a preferential manner relative to other solar garden developers. Include information on how Nicollet [P]rojects will be identified to Xcel personnel, Nicollet's access to information on Xcel's distribution system, billing treatment, and how Xcel will ensure non-discriminatory treatment through the interconnection process.

Our response describes the safeguards that ensure these projects have not received preferential treatment in the Interconnection process. In response to their question we stated¹:

At the outset, it should be noted that the timeline of the negotiations demonstrate that Nicollet Projects did not receive any preferential treatment when it comes to the initial approval of these solar projects. The developer, NEE, has been following the SRC Program process in the same way as any other developer. All projects were submitted for approval before initial discussions between NEE and the Company or Nicollet Projects commenced in January 2017. Neither the Company nor Nicollet Projects had influence on the projects submitted by NEE into the SRC Program.

The SRC Program is governed by the Commission-approved tariffs. As owner of projects within the program, Nicollet Projects will be bound by those tariffs and will stand in the same position as all other Community Solar Garden Operators...

... Nicollet Projects has not had and will continue not to have access to non-public distribution grid information, customer data, or program data. The

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¹ Response has been summarized. Our complete response to Department Information Request No. 4 was attached to the Department's Comments.

Nicollet Projects negotiating team submitted affidavits with the initial petition that attest to these facts.

All developers have had and will continue to have an equal opportunity to develop CSGs under the SRC Program, without regard to the participation of Nicollet Projects. Rather than discouraging other developers from entering the market due to an unfair advantage or receiving preferential treatment, as claimed by the OAG, Nicollet Projects' participation in the program benefits the SRC Program as a whole. As an offtaker of project portfolios, Nicollet Projects provides an attractive long-term ownership exit strategy for developers wishing to market portfolios of constructed projects.

2. Customer Relationship Safeguards

The Company is committed to making sure that any CSG projects owned by the Company, or Company-related affiliates, do not have an advantage when it comes to competing for customers. Neither the Company nor Nicollet Projects is handling the customer-facing aspects of the CSG directly. As we explained in our response to the Departments Information Request No. 4:

Further, Nicollet Projects will be outsourcing the subscriber-facing contact to NEE through a Customer Management Agreement. NEE has been independently marketing the subscription offer to its projects to potential subscribers without any information or any assistance from Nicollet Projects or Xcel Energy. Per the Customer Management Agreement with NEE, in the event a subscriber were to withdraw from the program, replacement of that subscriber will be handled by NEE —who has no greater access to the Company's customer records and market research than any other solar developer...

The model Nicollet Projects is using as an eventual garden owner assures that neither it nor the Company would benefit in any way from access to customer data or other potential "marketing" advantages, and thus the safeguards in place are more than sufficient to comply with the requirement to treat utility and non-utility program participants alike, even though this is not a utility project.

B. No financial conflict of interest exists

Given how the CSG program is structured, the Company has from the time of its initial community solar program proposal been focused on overall program costs and

customer impacts. The Company's position in the CSG proceeding has consistently focused on finding ways to deliver a successful program with a balanced cost impact for customers.

The OAG makes a wholly unsupported assertion that if a non-regulated affiliate participated as a garden owner, that this would somehow modify Company behavior with respect to its focus on developing a successful CSG program with balanced customer cost impacts. The OAG asserts that the Company will instead be inclined to advocate for maximum compensation in the program and abandon our interest in keeping electricity rates low. There is no foundation for such a claim and, in fact, there is direct evidence to the contrary.

For example, as recently as two weeks ago the Company joined the OAG in opposing the inclusion of incentives in the subscriber compensation model.² The Company's arguments in that matter focused on the lack of an evidentiary record to support an increase and the lack of analysis on customer impacts in the incentive proposal. This position, argued to the Commission well after the Affiliated Interest request was initiated, is entirely consistent with the Company's long-term advocacy on program cost impacts. There is no evidence of any conflict of interest that would preclude the approval of the Company's Affiliated Interest request.

C. OAG's recommendation harms low-income solar efforts

The OAG states, "neither Xcel nor sister companies within the Northern States Power Company system should be permitted to participate in the community solar garden market [...]"³ This sweeping prohibition would effectively preclude the Company from pursuing its joint access partnership to bring forward a community solar garden to serve low income customers at Railroad Island in Saint Paul, a project submitted in compliance with a direct Commission order.⁴

As the Commission is aware, this project is designed to expand access to community solar to low income customers. The Company will own the Railroad Island solar facility directly, rather than through non-regulated affiliates. The Company has, in that matter, similarly set forth its compliance with both the statutory requirement to treat utility- and non-utility participants alike, as well as the Commission's requirement to provide a plan to safeguards against discriminatory treatment. Despite its

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² Docket No. E002/M-13-867, MPUC hearing date October 24, 2017.

³ See October 25, 2017 Comments of the Office of Attorney General, page 1.

⁴ See Docket No. E002/M-17-527.

recommendation for a sweeping prohibition of Company participation, the OAG has voiced no opposition to the Company's proposal for participation in that context.

We agree that there should be no objection to the Company's proposal because it is not only fully compliant, but is among the most comprehensive efforts to bring CSG access directly to low-income customers in our service territory and provides an innovative model to generate learnings. If the Company were subject to the OAG's broad prohibition, we believe it would harm future efforts to expand CSG access to low-income customers.

CONCLUSION

We appreciate the opportunity to provide this Reply, and we appreciate the Department's recommendation that the Commission should approve our Affiliated Interest request. The Company will utilize a regulatory adjustment to make sure that the indirect cost allocation procedures comply with Commission Order.

The OAG's objection did not raise any concerns not already addressed and refuted in Information Request responses provided to the Department and their characterization that the Company would have financial conflicts of interests are unproven. Their overly broad objection is unsupported and may harm future CSG program developments, including the ability for the Company and its community partners to expand access to community solar for low-income customers.

Xcel Energy respectfully requests that the Commission approve the use of the Interconnection Agreement and Standard Contract for the CSG projects that are planned to be purchased by Nicollet projects and approve the ASA between XES and Nicollet Projects.

Dated: November 6, 2017

Northern States Power Company

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Carl Cronin, hereby certify that I have this day served copies of the foregoing document on the attached list of persons.

- <u>xx</u> by depositing a true and correct copy thereof, properly enveloped with postage paid in the United States mail at Minneapolis, Minnesota
- <u>xx</u> electronic filing

Docket Nos. E002/AI-17-577

Dated this 6th day of November 2017

/s/

Carl Cronin Regulatory Administrator

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