

March 23, 2021

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

RE: Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources
Docket No. G008/M-21-48

Dear Mr. Seuffert,

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

In the Matter of an Inquiry into CenterPoint Energy's Request for Approval of its Advanced Metering Project.

The petition was filed on December 18, 2020 by:

Amber Lee Director, Regulatory Affairs CenterPoint Energy 505 Nicollet Mall PO Box 59038 Minneapolis, MN 55459-0038

The Department recommends that the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (Commission) deny approval of the Advanced Meter Project. The Department is available to answer any questions the Commission may have.

Sincerely,

/s/ SUSAN L. PEIRCE Rate Analyst Coordinator

SLP/ja Attachment



## **Before the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission**

# Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce Division of Energy Resources

Docket No. G008/M-21-48

#### I. BACKGROUND

On May 20, 2020, the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (Commission) opened an *Inquiry into Utility Investments that May Assist Minnesota's Economic Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic, and* issued a *Notice of Reporting Required by Utilities* (Docket No. E,G999/CI-20-492) seeking information from all rate-regulated electric and gas utilities in Minnesota on ongoing, planned or proposed investment projects that meet the following conditions:

- Provide significant utility system benefits;
- Are consistent with approved resource plans, approved natural gas distribution infrastructure or pipeline safety plans, triennial conservation plans and existing Commission orders;
- Reduce carbon or other pollutant emissions in the power sector or across energy sectors;
- Increase access to conservation and clean energy resources for Minnesotans;
- Create jobs or otherwise assist in economic recovery for Minnesotans; and
- Use woman, veteran, or minority owned businesses as much as possible and provide documentation of these efforts.

On December 18, 2020, CenterPoint Energy (CPE or the Company) filed a petition requesting Commission approval of seven<sup>1</sup> investment projects which the Company which would assist Minnesota's economic recovery and met the Commission's criteria.

On January 14, 2021, the Commission opened this Docket No. G008/M-21-48 to separately address approval of CenterPoint Energy's request for approval of its Advanced Metering Project. On January 15, 2020, the Commission issued a *Notice of Comment Period*, seeking comment on the following:

- Should the Commission approve CenterPoint's request for approval of its Advanced Metering Project;
- Should the Commission approve CenterPoint's request for approval of deferred accounting;
- If deferred accounting is approved, should carrying costs be approved?
- Are additional reporting metrics needed?
- Any other issues or concerns related to this matter?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> CPE's petition contained seven projects; however, one of the projects, Advanced Metering infrastructure has been separately docketed in Docket No. G008/M-21-48.

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#### II. SUMMARY OF THE FILING

CenterPoint proposes to begin installing advanced meters in the ordinary course of replacing or installing new meters in 2021. The new advanced meters have enhancements that permit automatic shut-off of gas flows under certain conditions, and can improve safety and reliability of the Company's system. In its September 15, 2020 filing in Docket No. E,G999/CI-20-492, CenterPoint initially proposed its Advanced Meter Project as part of its Phase II projects to commence in 2022. In its entirety, the Project will replace almost all of the residential service meters in the Company's territory and involve total capital spending of approximately \$280 million. In its December 18, 2020 filing for its Tranche I projects, the Company proposed to accelerate spending on advanced meter installation with the proposal to install approximately 23,000 meters in 2021 for new residential service, and when residential meters require replacement due to damage or other reasons. The Company estimates the incremental capital costs of the Project at approximately \$1.5 million in 2021.

## III. DEPARTMENT ANALYSIS

In its September 15, 2020 filing in Docket No. E,G999/CI-20-492, CenterPoint indicated that its Advanced Meter Project was included as a Phase II project, not a Phase I project because it required additional analysis and review. Specifically, the Company indicated it planned to provide "(1) an evaluation of project alternatives; and (2) further detail around the scope of these projects, year by year." In a subsequent letter<sup>2</sup>, the Company stated it "determined it would be valuable to move a limited scope of the full Advanced Meter Project into 2021...while we continued to develop and refine the details of the full Phase 2 plan."

Despite earlier statements that additional analysis and review was needed and that the Company would provide an evaluation of project alternatives, CenterPoint now proposes to proceed with the Advanced Meter Project, albeit on a small scale. The Company has undertaken no additional analysis and review, nor provided an evaluation of alternatives.

The Department does not see a benefit to rushing a portion of the Project forward without the analysis the Company initially intended to provide CenterPoint is free to request consideration of the Advanced Meter Project as part of its Phase 2 proposals once it has completed its evaluation of alternatives.

## A. DEFERRED ACCOUNTING

CenterPoint is requesting to apply deferred account to future costs and revenues associated with its Tranche I projects. The Department addresses how deferred accounting treatment is typically used and its application to CenterPoint's Advanced Meter Project.

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## 1. Use of Deferred Accounting

The Commission has broad authority under Minn. Stat. Section 216B.10 to address the necessary accounting, reporting, and auditing of public utilities under the Commission's jurisdiction. Additionally, Minn. Rule 7825.0300, Subparts 1 and 2 confirm the adoption of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC)<sup>3</sup> Uniform System of Accounts (USofA), with some clarifications. The USofA FERC Account 182.3 – Other Regulatory Assets allows for deferred accounting to create regulatory assets that result from the ratemaking actions of regulatory agencies.

Utilities have occasionally framed deferred accounting as an exception to the USofA under Minn. Rule 7825.0300, Subpart 4. Because the USofA – specifically, FERC Account 182.3 – does provide a mechanism for deferred accounting, the Department does not believe an exception to the USofA is needed. Nevertheless, the Code of Federal Regulations necessitates that utilities justify requests to use deferred accounting and obtain approval from the appropriate regulatory agency (in this instance, the Commission) in order to defer expenses and investments for possible future rate recovery under FERC Account 182.3.

The Commission has exercised its authority to approve or deny deferred accounting in cases where utilities have met a substantial burden to justify potentially imposing a higher financial burden on consumers, beyond recovery of the costs that the Commission has determined to be just and reasonable. In previous cases, the Commission has evaluated deferred accounting proposals using various criteria, as discussed below.

Deferred accounting is special accounting treatment that is an exception to balanced and fair ratemaking. The Commission authorizes rates to allow a utility a reasonable opportunity to recover from consumers representative costs of providing utility service. Those rates remain in effect until the utility files a new rate case. Until then, utilities are not entitled to dollar-for-dollar recovery of all actual costs between rate cases; similarly, ratepayers receive no benefit when a utility reduces costs between rate cases. Instead, utilities are expected to make reasonable decisions to ensure that the funds they receive from consumers are spent prudently. Thus, normal ratemaking and allowing utilities to recover representative costs set in rate cases is the Commission's primary tool to ensure that utilities act in a prudent manner and that rates are just and reasonable, as required by Minnesota Statutes, §216B.03.

Deferred accounting, by contrast, allows a utility to postpone, or defer, the standard accounting treatment that would otherwise be required for the financial item or transaction in question. For example, for financial accounting purposes, a utility normally recognizes expenses as they are incurred, even if the expenses are incurred outside of a rate case test year and are not expressly included in established base rates. This approach is consistent with the ratemaking principles described above. Under deferred accounting, however, a utility would suspend the recognition of the relevant expense, record the expense in a separate deferral account (FERC Account 182.3 – Other Regulatory Assets), and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The Federal Power Commission is the predecessor of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

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subsequently seek recovery from ratepayers of the expense, typically over some amortization period, in a future rate case.

While an explicit statutory or rule-based test does not exist to evaluate public utility deferred accounting requests,<sup>4</sup> the Commission has previously described certain criteria and circumstances under which deferred accounting may be appropriately applied.<sup>5</sup> A prior Commission order addressing deferred accounting summarized some of these criteria and circumstances with the following statement:

Deferred accounting is a regulatory tool used primarily to hold utilities harmless when they incur out-of-test-year expenses that, because of their nature or size, should be eligible for possible rate recovery as a matter of public policy. Traditionally, deferred accounting has been reserved for costs that are unusual, unforeseeable, and large enough to have significant impact on the utility's financial condition. Deferred accounting has also sometimes been permitted when utilities have incurred sizeable expenses to meet important public policy mandates.<sup>6</sup>

The Department agrees with the Commission that deferred accounting treatment can be a valuable regulatory tool when applied using strict standards, and we believe that it can be useful in addressing extraordinary circumstances that call for a departure from standard accounting principles. The Department supports granting deferred accounting when a utility meets its burden of demonstrating that it has met the criteria applied by the Commission in various prior proceedings to determine whether the costs for which deferred accounting is requested are (1) unusual, unforeseeable, and/or extraordinary (2) financially significant in amount, (3) related to utility operations, and (4) likely to provide or did provide ratepayer benefit.<sup>7</sup> Using a specific set of criteria to evaluate utility requests for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The Commission has previously addressed its process for reviewing deferred accounting requests by stating that "While the Commission has allowed deferred accounting of manufactured-gas-plant cleanup costs in the past, these prior decisions do not bind the Commission. Rather, in each case the Commission must decide whether the specific facts and circumstances support a finding of good cause to allow cost fluctuations occurring outside of a rate-case test year to be accounted for in a future rate proceeding." Commission's October 17, 2018 *Order*, at 4, Docket No. G002/M-17-894, *In the Matter of the Petition of Northern States Power Company for Approval of Deferred Accounting for Manufactured-Gas-Plant Cleanup Costs.* In reference to deferred accounting decisions, the Commission has also stated that "Each decision is unique, and must be based on the particular set of facts present before the Commission." Commission's January 10, 2017 *Order*, Docket No. E015/M-16-648, at 5, *In the Matter of a Petition for Approval of Deferred Accounting Treatment of Costs Related to the 2016 Storm Response and Recovery*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Regarding its evaluation criteria for deferred accounting requests, the Commission has previously noted that "In the 1990s, the Commission permitted deferral of manufactured-gas-plant cleanup cost accounting in cases involving Minnegasco, Interstate Power Company, and Xcel. The Commission's rationale varied from case to case, but the most important factors were that the costs involved were (1) unusual and unforeseen, (2) substantial, (3) related to utility operations, and (4) likely to provide a ratepayer benefit." Commission's October 17, 2018 *Order*, Docket No. G002/M-17-894, at 2, footnote 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Commission's October 17, 2018 Order, Docket No. G002/M-17-894, at 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For example, while the Commission's evaluation criteria differed among the following listed dockets, the factors of primary importance were that the relevant costs were a combination of (1) unusual, unforeseen, and/or extraordinary (2)

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deferred accounting is likely to result in more consistent analyses and outcomes across time and among proceedings than evaluations that are made without considering a set of criteria. The Department is also aware of circumstances in which the Commission has approved deferred accounting for significant expenses incurred pursuant to public policy mandates;<sup>8</sup> as the Commission has previously stated, these approvals have "generally been in cases where the Commission itself mandated the expenditure."<sup>9</sup>

In addition, because deferred accounting has the potential to increase the financial burden on consumers, beyond the levels that the Commission previously determined to be just and reasonable, any request to defer costs should be offset by any and all sources of higher revenues, tax rebates, credits or other relevant sources of funds.

The Department notes that the wording and description of the criteria used in evaluating deferred accounting requests sometimes varies among the records in previous dockets. Thus, the Department emphasizes that its analysis of the applicable criteria in the instant docket is not intended to either capture every prior iteration or one specific instance of evaluating deferred accounting requests. Instead, our objective is to present the Commission with an analysis that captures the core ideas and considerations previously used and potentially relevant to the deferred accounting decision before the Commission in the current Petition.

significant or substantial in amount, (3) related to utility operations, and (4) likely to provide or did provide ratepayer benefit:

- Commission's July 16, 2012 Order in Docket No. E002/M-11-1263, In the Matter of Xcel Energy's Petition for Deferred Accounting for Property Tax Costs;
- Commission's January 10, 2017 Order in Docket No. E015/M-16-648 In the Matter of a Petition for Approval of Deferred Accounting Treatment of Costs Related to the 2016 Storm Response and Recovery;
- Commission's November 30, 2017 Order in Docket No. G011/M-17-409, In the Matter of a Petition by the Minnesota Energy Resources Corporation for Approval of Farm Tap Customer-Owned Fuel Line Replacement Plan, Tariff Amendments, and Deferred Accounting. At pages 9 10 of this Order, the Commission explained that in addition to meeting the other criteria, the relevant costs were intended to serve public policy goals and would be subject to review for reasonableness and prudence in a future rate case. The Department notes however, that the process of creating a regulatory asset through deferred accounting automatically provides for a future opportunity for regulators to review the relevant costs for reasonableness and prudence, as recovery of these deferred costs are approved through a separate proceeding, such as a general rate case.

- Commission's February 25, 2005 Order in Docket No. E002/M-03-1462, In the Matter of Northern States Power Company's Petition for Approval of Deferred Accounting for Costs Incurred for the Web Tool and Time-of-Use Pilot Project. At page 5 of this Order the Commission not only considered the fact that Xcel incurred costs to meet a Commission mandate, but the Commission also found that the "costs incurred were reasonable" and this was "not a case where the Company...should have foreseen [incurring these costs] in its last rate case."
- Commission's January 20, 1994 Order in Docket No. G011/M-91-989, In the Matter of Peoples Natural Gas
   Company's Request to Establish a Tariff for Repairing and Replacing Farm-Tap Lines. In this Order, deferred
   accounting was granted in lieu of the current cost recovery requested by the utility for costs incurred in
   implementing a Commission-required safety inspection program.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> For example, the Commission approved deferred accounting in the following dockets for utility costs incurred pursuant to a Commission mandate:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Commission's October 17, 2018 Order, Docket No. G002/M-17-894, at 5.

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## 2. Advanced Meter Project

CenterPoint filed its Advanced Meter Project in response to a Commission request for utility proposed investment projects that could assist in Minnesota's recovery from the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission specifically sought spending that would be incremental to the Company's planned spending. The Company just recently received Commission approval of a 4.7 percent rate increase in its 2019 rate case. <sup>10</sup> CenterPoint included spending on meter replacement in its recent 2019 rate case. The Company has typically filed rate increase requests every two years, and indicates in its filing in this proceeding its plan to file a multi-year rate case in late 2021. <sup>11</sup>

As noted above, the Department supports the use of deferred accounting when spending is (1) unusual, unforeseeable, and/or extraordinary (2) financially significant in amount, (3) related to utility operations, and (4) likely to provide or did provide ratepayer benefit. Whether the spending is pursuant to a public policy mandate is also a relevant factor to contemplate when evaluating a deferred accounting request. The Department considered how each of these criteria/factors apply to the instant matter, and we provide the following corresponding discussion:

- Unusual/unforeseeable/extraordinary: In the case of the Advanced Meter Project, there is nothing unusual/unforeseeable or extraordinary about the project. The Company has planned to undertake its Advanced Meter Project for some time, and proposes spending in this instance that is a small portion of the total \$280 million cost of the total Project. Although, the spending in the current case may represent an acceleration of planned spending, the Department does not consider the Advanced Meter Project to be unusual/unforeseeable/ extraordinary since they are a part of normal course of business operations.
- Financially significant in amount: In total the Tranche I projects may be financially significant, but not necessarily as individual projects. The Department notes that a utility's base rates are not intended to achieve dollar-for-dollar cost recovery; instead, it is expected that a utility's capital and non-capital expenditures would fluctuate somewhat between rate cases, resulting in a relatively balanced combination of minor under- and over-recovery.
- Related to utility operations: As noted in the first bullet point in this list, CenterPoint's proposed
  projects are unusual only in their timing, but not in their purpose or nature. Even without the
  Commission solicitation for utility spending in the instant docket, the Company would still plan
  to pursue these projects as a part of its normal utility operations, albeit over a longer time
  period.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> In the Matter of the Application by CenterPoint Energy Resources Corp. d/b/a CenterPoint Energy Minnesota Gas for Authority to Increase Natural Gas Rates in Minnesota, Order Accepting and Adopting Agreement Setting Rates, and Initiating Development of Conservation Programs for Renters, Docket No. G008/GR-19-524, March 1, 2021.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Initial Filing, Exhibit B, Summary Tab.

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• Likely to provide ratepayer benefit: CenterPoint details the benefits of these projects including job creation, avoided gas costs, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and improved access, equity and engagement.

Pursuant to public policy mandate: On May 20, 2020, the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (Commission) opened an *Inquiry into Utility Investments that May Assist Minnesota's Economic Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic, and* issued a *Notice of Reporting Required by Utilities* the Commission's (Docket No. E,G999/CI-20-492) seeking information from all rate-regulated electric and gas utilities in Minnesota on ongoing, planned or proposed investment projects that meet the following conditions:

- Provide significant utility system benefits;
- Are consistent with approved resource plans, approved natural gas distribution infrastructure or pipeline safety plans, triennial conservation plans and existing Commission orders;
- Reduce carbon or other pollutant emissions in the power sector or across energy sectors;
- Increase access to conservation and clean energy resources for Minnesotans;
- Create jobs or otherwise assist in economic recovery for Minnesotans; and
- Use woman, veteran, or minority owned businesses as much as possible and provide documentation of these efforts.

CenterPoint's Tranche I Projects were submitted in response to the Commission's directive.

The Department concludes that CenterPoint's Advanced Meter Project does not meet the majority of the typical criteria used to evaluate deferred accounting requests. However, if the Commission wishes to approve the projects under the public policy requirement, we recommend the Commission limit deferred accounting to (1) an overall cap of \$1.5 million, the project cost estimate provided by the Company for 2021, and (2) the costs that CenterPoint incurs for the project from the date the Commission approves deferred accounting until the Company files its next rate case. In addition, as discussed in the next section, the Department recommends the Commission defer its final approval of projects until a full understanding of the rate impact of the recent polar vortex on customer bills is known.

#### B. RATE IMPACT OF THE RECENT POLAR VORTEX

In early February, record cold weather across the middle section of the United States led to price spikes in natural gas prices. Although Minnesota was not affected by outages as experienced in Texas, natural gas price increases will ultimately pass through to Minnesota customers. Until the Commission has a full understanding of the rate impact natural gas prices resulting from the polar vortex will have on Minnesota customers, the Department recommends deferring approval on any of CenterPoint's Tranche I projects. CenterPoint customers have experienced a 4.7 percent rate increase as a result of the Company's recent rate case (Docket No. G008/GR-19-524), and are likely to see another rate case

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filed by the Company later this year.<sup>12</sup> Although the Company has not proposed current recovery for the Advanced Meter Project and instead proposes deferred accounting, the Department is hesitant to recommend approval of future spending projects without a fuller understanding of the rate impact of the polar vortex. Any rate increase, whether the result of the recent rate case, cold weather and higher natural gas prices, or the result of deferred recovery on Tranche I projects will impact customers already struggling under tough economic conditions.

The Department recommends denial of the Advanced Meter Project. However, if the Commission wishes to approve the projects under the public policy requirement, we recommend the Commission limit deferred accounting to (1) an overall cap of \$1.5 million, the project cost estimate provided by the Company for 2021, and (2) the costs that CenterPoint incurs for the project from the date the Commission approves deferred accounting until the Company files its next rate case.

## IV. DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department recommends that the Commission deny approval of CenterPoint's Advanced Meter Project.

/ja

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Initial Filing, Exhibit B, Summary Tab.

## CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Sharon Ferguson, hereby certify that I have this day, served copies of the following document on the attached list of persons by electronic filing, certified mail, 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

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Dated this 23rd day of March 2021

/s/Sharon Ferguson

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