

AIDA CAMACHO-WELCH

Secretary

Mary-Anna Holden

Commissioner

May 27, 2021

RE: Commenting on New Jersey Community Solar Successor Program

Commissioner Holden and Secretary Camacho-Welch:

Neighborhood Sun wishes to file comments in reference to the Successor Program of New Jersey. Specifically, these are the topics we are providing our view on: 1) Low to Moderate Income verification, 2) Net Metering, and 3) Community Outreach and Education.

**Topic #1: In the matter of income verification measures in the Community Solar Pilot and Successor Programs. Docket No. QO20080588**

On October 2, 2020, the Board issued an order that stated, "The Board, finding good cause, HEREBY WAIVES N.J.A.C. 14:8-9.8(d)(2)(ii) for any PY1 participants that can demonstrate LMI eligibility through alternative means acceptable to Staff. The Board DIRECTS any applicant to PY1 that wishes to avail itself of this waiver to provide proposed LMI documentation and evidence to Staff. PY1 developers may also wish to review the Rule Proposal for examples of alternative financial documentation that may be acceptable in lieu of tax returns. The Board designates Commissioner Holden to oversee the process of verifying income eligibility and to report back to the Board periodically as the Commissioner deems it necessary."

Neighborhood Sun is cooperatively working on subscribing LMI residents to two different PY1 projects. These two projects are "The Delanco Landfill" and the "National Shrine at the Blue Army", for a combined capacity of about 3.8 MWDC. Neighborhood Sun, together with other companies, has experienced a great deal of difficulty in subscribing LMI residents due to the current income verification requirements. Similar grievances were voiced during the five Solar Workshops that the Board has held in the past few weeks.

Therefore, per the Board order issued on October 2, 2020, we hereby request Staff to issue the final rule on this matter. By establishing a better and more flexible income verification method, the Board will enable the market to expand and drive positive impact in New Jersey communities. Neighborhood Sun asks the Board to utilize the following alternative methods to verify income for both low and moderate income residents who wish to participate in the project.

**1. Self-Attestation.** Our preferred method of verifying income is to have the subscriber sign an affidavit stating that they qualify as low or moderate income, and providing their family income for the prior calendar year in the affidavit. Given that the benefit of community solar is monetarily limited, we do not believe there is a significant incentive for subscribers to be untruthful on their attestation. Furthermore, the benefit of opening up the program to many more residents outweigh the limited risk of potential untruthful self-attestation forms.

We believe option one (1) is the best for the market and for building a strong and equitable Community Solar program in New Jersey. If this is not acceptable to Staff or the Board, we propose the following:

**2. Self-Attestation Plus Census Tracts** – Utilize the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey ("ACS") income data for the state's Census Tracts, which can be analyzed to establish that individuals within certain census tracts have a higher probability of being low or moderate income households. Self-Attestation would be on a form where the subscriber attesting that they meet the program's income eligibility definition. Using self-attestation in conjunction with other income proxies is an approach employed in the Illinois Solar for All program, which provides numerous verification options for community solar providers, including an income attestation.

A household in a Census Tract with median income meeting the definition criteria as low or moderate income should be granted deference in verifying its eligibility with self-attestation. Specifically, we propose that self-attestation should be an allowable option ONLY when the subscriber resides within a Census Tract with a high probability of being low or moderate income. The current Moderate income limit for a one person household is \$52,850/year. That limit is the lowest among all the Moderate Income thresholds, therefore any Census Tract below that threshold should be allowed to qualify households with autocertification.

Thus, if the subscriber's Census Tract median income is \$52,500/year or below, then the subscriber should be permitted to demonstrate its Low or Moderate Income eligibility via self-attestation. We advocate to utilize \$52,500/year as the max median income of a Census tract as it is right below \$52,850/year. That Census Tract will therefore have a majority of households that qualify as Low or Moderate Income. Our Analysis from the official Census Tract Data available at <https://nj.gov/governor/njopportunityzones/> shows that 377 Census Tracts in New Jersey have a median income at or below \$52,500/year. There are a total of 1711 Census Tracts in the State of New Jersey, thereby this Self-attestation model would apply to 22.03% of all Census Tract.

**3. Supporting documentation** – A third, additional way to verify if a household is qualified as Low or Moderate Income, is to provide the Subscriber Organizations with the documents listed at this page [neighborhoodsun.solar/verify/](https://neighborhoodsun.solar/verify/) Please note that Neighborhood Sun currently asks for three (3) years of tax returns on that webpage, in absence of any other supporting documentation. The request will be updated to one (1)

year of tax return or a recent paystub once the Board approves a more lenient verification method. So the list will be especially relevant if the Board adopts the 2nd option but the qualified household is not in one of the 377 Census Tracts where self-attestation is an option.

## **Topic #2: Allowing Net Metering Ratepayers to Enroll in a Community Solar Project**

It is our recommendation to the BPU to allow residents with net metering the ability to enroll in a community solar project. When we began enrolling customers into our first Year 1 project, we were told that utility customers with rooftop solar were able to subscribe for community solar; however, most recently, we were notified by the utility company that they had removed our subscribers with net metering from our customer list because the BPU states that community solar projects are not available to ratepayers with net metering. Many householders that we speak to with rooftop solar don't receive full coverage from their arrays and would benefit by supplementing with a community solar subscription. In some cases, they're only receiving 50% solar coverage from their panels, for one reason or another. These net metered customers are environmentalists who understand the importance of clean, renewable energy, and are our best advocates for the Community Solar Program; yet, by not allowing them to supplement with community solar, they're being forced to use dirty energy. If community solar is truly inclusive to everyone in NJ, then we ask you to please allow ALL ratepayers – including those with net metering – to be able to enroll in a community solar project.

## **Topic #3: Community Outreach and Education Regarding the Community Solar Pilot and Successor Programs**

The New Jersey Community Solar Pilot Program has created a critical step in our state's goal to reach 100% renewable energy by 2050, and an invaluable benefit to NJ residents, particularly those within our most vulnerable communities. For ratepayers to have the opportunity to energize their homes at a discounted price from the utilities' rates, and help to provide cleaner air to their communities by replacing dirty electricity with renewable energy, the NJ Community Solar Program will prove to be one of NJ's greatest assets. However, throughout our efforts to acquire subscribers for our community solar projects, we've experienced two obstacles time and time again: 1.) residents are unaware of community solar and, 2.) residents are highly skeptical of its benefits and rewards.

NJ households, particularly those in LMI neighborhoods, have been preyed upon by third-party energy companies and solar outfits that coerce residents into energy schemes that, in many instances, have cost the ratepayer more money per month than their original utility plan. In addition, these “energy and money saving” plans can be incredibly difficult and cost-prohibitive to cancel. These experiences have led residents to be fearful of any company offering “energy” or “solar”, particularly if the program seems “too good to be true”. This has created a huge negative impact on our outreach efforts and has prevented community members from subscribing to a community solar project and receiving the benefits the Community Solar Program is intended to provide.

During several of the five Workshops regarding the Solar Successor Program, Board's Staff mentioned that they would welcome suggestions and advice on educating ratepayers about Community Solar. With that in mind, we would like to recommend the following outreach and education components be included within the NJ Clean Energy marketing efforts:

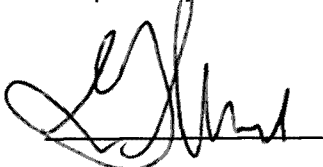
- Employ teams of Community Solar Ambassadors to educate residents on the Community Solar Program and its benefits. Information delivered by staff members representing the NJ Clean Energy Program, as opposed to for-profit subscriber organizations, will result in trust, comfort, and a much greater reception of the program overall. Teams of community solar educators could attend street fairs and events, wherever there are large gatherings, to distribute and provide information on community solar and answer questions. Too, teams could be deployed in LMI communities to knock on doors, greet residents, and promote the benefits of community solar and the projects within their utility territory. The Community Solar Ambassador position would be a seasonal, during the temperate months when outdoor events are scheduled, and would only enhance the benefits that community solar brings to job creation in NJ and support of LMI communities.
- During one of the recent Successor Program webinars, it was announced that the community solar landing page on the NJBPU website will receive a refresh. We would recommend that not only should the consumer and solar developer pages be separate altogether, but a portal strictly for solar developers should be included to limit any possible confusion on behalf of the consumer. In addition, we encourage you to provide a project portal for consumers to be able to search for a solar farm within their utility territory. The portal should include a list of all approved projects in NJ with clear details and terms for each, as well as contact information, allowing the consumer to weigh the differences and determine which project best suits their needs.
- The utility providers should include inserts in their billing, both in paper and electronic forms. Inserts should explain the community solar program and highlight available projects within the territory, with contact information for each. Again, a cost and energy savings initiative supported by the utility company will bring credibility to the Community Solar Program and will enable utility customers to feel safe to enroll in a project.

- When a resident reaches out to any of the NJ Home Energy Assistance programs for help with their energy bills, community solar should be included as one of the options of support. Energy Assistance program staff could provide project and contact information on a solar farm within the resident's geographic area, if one exists. Even if a project isn't available within their area, the resident should still be made aware of community solar so they can seek out a project as the program continues to expand.
- During home energy efficiency audits, companies offering these services should be allowed to provide information on community solar as another option to lower their bills as much as possible, apart from making their residences more efficient. By partnering and cross-promoting with subscriber organizations, energy efficiency companies can provide the best cost-saving measures to their clients that are available.

### Conclusion

Neighborhood Sun is grateful to the Board for having engaged with all stakeholders in order to improve the Community Solar Program. Thank you for your consideration of these comments. We look forward to dialogue on many of the subjects discussed and look forward to a sustainable community solar market in New Jersey.

Respectfully submitted,



(signature)

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