

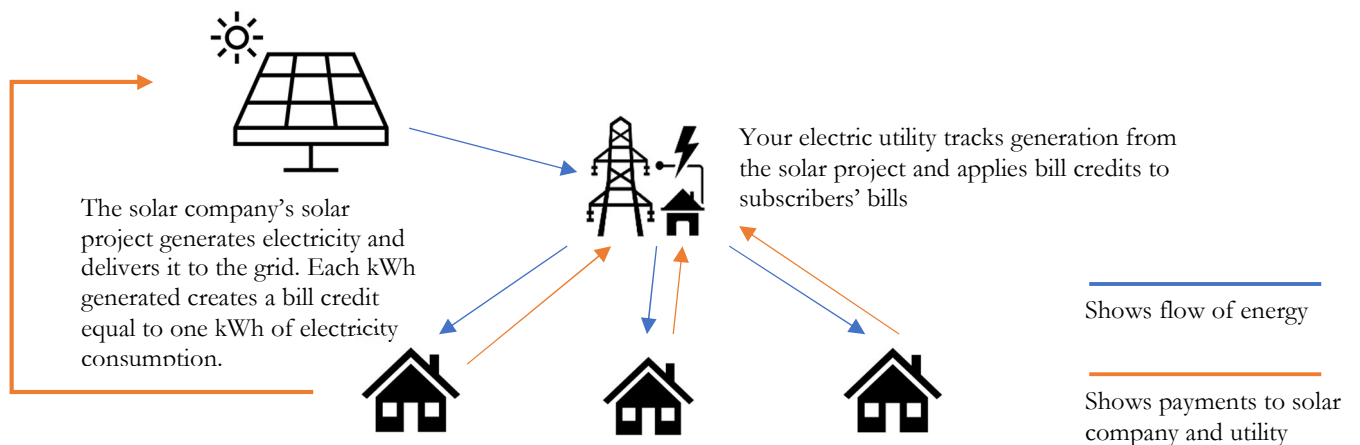
Community Solar Subscription - Frequently Asked Questions

Maine Office of the Public Advocate

This FAQ was prepared to answer the most common questions our office receives about community solar subscription agreements. Please note that the information below only applies to customers that are served by Central Maine Power or Versant Power. Customers served by another utility may not be eligible to participate in community solar. This guide is limited to solar subscription offerings for residential customers and does not address the tariff rate net energy billing program available only to commercial customers.

Q. What is a community solar subscription?

A. Under Maine’s net energy billing law, eligible solar projects receive credit for each kWh of electricity they generate. Utility customers can sign up with the owner of a solar project to receive a share of these credits generated by the project. Each credit offsets one kWh of electricity usage by the subscribing customer. The solar project can be located anywhere in the service territory of your utility (Central Maine Power or Versant Power’s Bangor Hydro District or Maine Public District). For basic information about the program, please refer to this link: https://www.maine.gov/meopa/electricity/community_solar.



Electric utility customers subscribed to the solar project receive bill credits on their monthly utility bills. Each credit reduces the customer's billed usage by one kWh. These subscribers pay the solar company directly in a separate bill to reimburse the solar company for generating the kWh that resulted in the subscriber's bill credit. Subscribers must continue to pay any remaining balance on their utility bill to their utility.

Q. Are the solar companies affiliated with Central Maine Power or Versant Power?

A. No. The solar companies are independent companies and have no affiliation with Central Maine Power or Versant Power. The utilities are responsible for applying the applicable number of kWh credits to your account based on communication from your solar company acting on your behalf. You will receive one bill from your utility and a separate bill from the solar company to pay for the generation of kWh that resulted in the credits that have been applied to your utility bill.

Q. A solar company is saying that I can save 15% on my monthly electric bill if I subscribe to their solar project. Is this correct?

A. The amount a subscriber owes to the solar company is negotiated between the subscriber and the solar company. It is not set by the utility or the PUC. In this case, it would be more accurate to say that you will save up to 15% of the value of the credits that show up on your bill and 85% of the value must be paid to the solar company. You will continue to be responsible for your utility's fixed customer charge and/or monthly minimum charges. These charges cannot be offset by solar credits. It is also possible that your subscription to the solar project may not be correctly sized to offset your full kWh usage each month. The details of your subscription size must be negotiated with the solar company. Refer to the diagram on page 1 for a brief overview of the flows of energy and payments to and from the utility, solar company, and consumer.

Keep in mind that 15% is a commonly used discount advertised by solar companies but it is not required by law. The rate you pay will depend on your agreement with the solar company and it could vary over time. It is very important that you read and understand the agreement before signing up.

Q. I have been on a waiting list with a solar company for a long time. Why does it take so long?

A. Due to new laws that have incentivized small-scale solar development in the state, there is an unprecedented number of pending projects waiting to be interconnected to the electric

grid. It is normal for this process to take months or even years. If you have questions about how long your specific project will take to come online, you need to contact the solar company directly. Our office does not know how long it will take for any specific project to become operational. The project sponsor is required to provide the utility with a list of project subscribers. The utility will likely move all subscribers to the same billing cycle before credits are applied to customer bills, and this process can take time.

Q. Can you recommend a reputable solar company to sign up with? Do you recommend I sign up?

A. The Office of the Public Advocate does not endorse any specific solar company or recommend in favor of or against participation in the program. Whether it makes sense to subscribe depends on the track record of the solar company, the circumstances of the customer and the specific agreement with the solar company. We urge customers to carefully read any solar subscription agreements and ask questions before signing up.

Q. The solar company has asked for my utility login credentials. Should I give it to them?

A. Many solar companies ask for a subscriber's utility account online login information so they have direct access to your monthly electricity usage. It is up to you whether you are comfortable sharing that information with the solar company; your utility cannot share it without your consent. There are likely other alternatives to sharing this information if you do not feel comfortable providing online access to your information to third parties. You should discuss this with the solar company if you have concerns.

Q. Why is the name of the solar company on my CMP or Versant bill different than the company that I signed up with and receive a bill from?

A. There are several reasons this could occur. Generally, a solar developer will hold each solar project in a separate company. The name of this company may be used on your CMP or Versant bill, but this legal name may be different from the trade name of the company

that owns or operates the project. Another reason may be that the company that recruits subscribers and handles billing for a project is not the owner of the project. It is also possible that the solar company you signed up with sold the project to another owner. It is important to read your solar subscription agreement carefully as these agreements will determine whether the owner can transfer ownership of the project to another company.

Q. I subscribed to a solar project, why do I still receive a monthly bill from my utility?

A. The credits generated by a solar facility cannot offset all charges from your utility. At a minimum, you will still be responsible for paying your utility's fixed customer charge or minimum charge. It is also possible that your subscription to the solar project is not sized to offset all of your electricity use each month. The details of your subscription size must be negotiated with the solar company. The solar company does not replace the role of your utility or your electricity supplier. The solar credits you receive from the solar company are used to reduce the delivery and supply charges that you would otherwise receive from your utility and your energy supplier.

Q. I am subscribed to a solar project, am I using renewable energy?

A. Probably not. Most of the solar company agreements do not transfer to the subscriber the project's renewable energy credits, the designation for how the government keeps track of what qualifies as renewable. This means that, as far as the government is concerned, the energy you receive has been stripped of its renewable attributes and it is not accurate to say that you are using renewable energy. If using renewable energy is important to you, you should make sure that the solar company is transferring to you the renewable energy credits that correspond with the number of kWh credits you receive from your subscription.

Q. I signed up with a solar company and just received a bill that is much larger than my normal electric utility bill. Is this a scam? What can I do?

A. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence. This can happen because the time when the most billing credits are generated by a solar project (summer) does not perfectly align with your electricity usage. Also, the first month you receive credits on your utility bill may include credits for generation that occurred from an earlier time period due to the delays associated with moving subscribers to the same billing cycle. As a result, some solar companies may issue large bills that coincide with when the credits are generated by their solar projects. These credits are then banked in your utility account and will offset your electricity usage throughout the year, for up to 12 months. But many customers are surprised by the large bills and may not have budgeted appropriately to pay the amount due to the solar company when it is due. For this reason, it is very important to understand how the solar company will bill you for the credits you purchase.

If you are unhappy with your agreement, you have the right under Maine law to cancel your solar subscription agreement up to five days after you receive your first bill or invoice from the solar company. If you cancel, you will be responsible for paying that first bill in full but no other bills or charges. After five days, whether you can cancel your bill will depend on the specific terms in your agreement.

Q. What happens if I purchase more credits than my monthly electricity usage?

A. Any unused credits are “banked” and applied against your future months’ electricity usage. Be aware, however, that unused credits can only be banked for 12 months, at which point they expire. You will not receive any compensation for expired credits. If your credits regularly exceed your monthly electricity usage, you should renegotiate your subscription size with your solar company.

Q. What happens to my banked credits if I close my account or move to a new location?

A. If you close the account and are not moving to another location within your utility’s service territory, any banked credits are lost and cannot be transferred. If you close one account and move to another location in your utility’s service territory, banked credits can be

transferred to the new account. It is your responsibility to contact the project sponsor to ensure that you are re-enrolled at your new address.

Q. Where can I see my usage, purchased credits, and banked generation information?

A. This information is reflected on the bill under your meter details. You will see your actual usage in kWh, credits based on kWh generation for that billing cycle, and the number of banked credits, if any.

Q. Can I transfer my banked credits to another customer?

A. No. Solar credits are not transferable or shareable after they have been applied to your account. If you are concerned that you are purchasing too many kWh credits, you should contact your solar company to discuss your subscription size.

Q. I can't pay my solar subscription bill. Can they shut off my power?

A. No. As long as you continue to pay your monthly utility bill (from Central Maine Power or Versant Power), you are not at risk of disconnection. The solar company can seek to collect any unpaid charges similar to any other creditor, but may not impose excessive fees or penalties beyond the costs of collection.

Q. I am in a dispute with a solar company. What are my rights?

A. You have the right to have your dispute resolved by the Maine Public Utilities Commission. Our office can assist you with the process. You should contact us at 207-624-3687 or opa@maine.gov.

Please note that you have the right to cancel your agreement, orally or in writing, until five days after you receive your first bill or invoice from the solar company and you will only be responsible for paying that first bill or invoice. If you are told that you will be responsible for additional fees or bills, contact our office for assistance.