Solar garden to grow green energy in Ashland

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A racking system is built prior to the installation of about 3,000 solar panels that make up Xcel Energy’s first one-megawatt Community Solar Garden in Eau Claire. That project was energized in October of 2017, and a second one-megawatt garden is planned for the La Crosse area this year. The third garden is proposed for construction in Ashland by the fall of 2019.

[Xcel Energy Photo](https://www.apg-wi.com/users/profile/Larry%20Servinsky)

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Ashland has been selected to be the third location for an Xcel Energy Community Solar Garden in the state of Wisconsin.

Xcel Energy made the announcement last Thursday, saying the facility would match one in Eau Claire that went on line in October of 2017. Another project is slated to be constructed in the La Crosse area this year.

If there is enough customer interest demonstrated in the project, the Ashland garden will be built in 2019 by OneEnergy Renewables, a Seattle-based independent developer of community and utility-scale solar energy projects across North America, with a focus on commercial, institutional and utility customers.

Xcel is no stranger to community solar gardens. As of October, they had 40 active community solar gardens producing more than 100 megawatts of emission-free, renewable energy in their system, making Xcel’s community solar garden program the largest in the nation.

The program, entitled the “Solar\*Connect Community,” would allow participants to choose the amount of solar energy they want to subscribe to for their home or business, within certain limits. The program would require a minimum subscription of 200 watts, with more electricity available in 200-watt increments up to a maximum of 400 kilowatts. Under the program, a subscription could be sized to offset up to 100 percent of the customer’s annual electricity use. Customers would receive a credit on their monthly bill based on the size of their subscription The subscriptions would be good for 25 years, and have to be paid in advance before the energy garden goes into operation. A minimum deposit of $200 per kilowatt is required to reserve the subscription capacity. The cost of the electricity is $320 for a 200-watt subscription, which represents about three percent of an average residential customer’s usage. A full kilowatt subscription would cost $1,600.

“This past year, we’ve had tremendous support for our Solar\*Connect Community program from both residential and business customers,” said Mark Stoering, president of Xcel Energy, Wisconsin. “They have told us they want more options when it comes to their energy and this program allows them to support locally sourced solar energy and receive bill credits at the same time.”

According to Xcel Community Service Manager Michael BeBeau, the three solar gardens are part of a pilot project that was approved by the Wisconsin Public Service Commission that was approved in 2016.

“We looked at distributing them throughout our service territory,” BeBeau said.

BeBeau said the development of the Ashland solar garden is dependent on a good level of interest by subscribers in the project. He said subscriptions needed to total 60 to 80 percent of the project’s capacity for it to go forward.

The output of the solar gardens is relatively small, one megawatt compared to the capacity of Ashland’s Bayfront generation facility, 76 megawatts, which in itself is fairly miniscule compared to the 547 megawatts produced by the average coal-fired electrical generation facility. Even that is dwarfed by the 3,875 megawatts produced by a typical nuclear power plant.

But power output alone misses the point. With a solar facility, there are no greenhouse gasses produced. No expensive scrubbing needed to protect the air, no need for nuclear waste facilities that must store highly radioactive waste for tens of thousands of years.

“It will provide a local, clean affordable source of energy for local residents and businesses alike,” BeBeau said, observing that the Community Solar Garden allowed people to participate in a meaningful solar energy effort without having to invest thousands of dollars for equipment, installation and maintenance.

BeBeau said the subscription program had gone “very well for the La Crosse and Eau Claire gardens.

“We hope that it will continue to go very well for the northern area garden located in Ashland,” he said.

The selection of Ashland as a site for the solar garden is perhaps particularly appropriate give the city’s status as an eco-municipality and the presence of Northland College, well known for its environmental emphasis.

“Xcel Energy’s development of a local solar garden is outstanding news,” said Northland College President Michael Miller. “It will assist with Northland’s goal of investing in renewable energy and becoming carbon neutral and assist the entire region in becoming resiliently self sufficient.

“We applaud the development and will be in discussions about how to participate and support the effort.”

The solar garden is to be located on land currently owned by Xcel Energy at their current Ashland facility. Customers can learn more at a UW Extension Renewable Energy Workshop on Feb. 8 from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center or the Xcel Energy “60 Minutes of Solar” meeting on Feb. 22, at Northland College’s Alvord Theatre.

In order to participate in the Solar\*Connect Community program, people have to be customers of Xcel Energy in Wisconsin.

“They can be a residential customer or a business customer, but they have to be a customer in Wisconsin,” BeBeau said.

Persons who want to know more about the Solar\*Connect Community program can visit [xcelenergy.com/SolarConnectCommunity](http://xcelenergy.com/SolarConnectCommunity). For more information about OneEnergy Renewables, visit [www.oneenergyrenewables.com](http://www.oneenergyrenewables.com/).