

THE PILLARS

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Black Community Engagement Now!

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NM Office of African American Affairs

Community Solar is not a new concept. However, Community Solar Development is just being recognized or promoted in New Mexico, and a few other states. The new developments were initiated through the passing of the Community Solar Bill SB84 . Through this bill:

“Authorized by the Community Solar Act in 2021, this renewable energy program allows homeowners, renters and businesses to get electricity from the same 45 solar energy farms, transmitted through the grids of major utility companies PNM, SPS and EPE.

New Mexicans can get credits on their utility bills for being part of the program, saving around 30% for at least five years, according to the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission.” (2)

The focus for the Office of African American Affairs is to study and identify relevant resources for Black/African American communities in New Mexico. Black/African American renters, home-owners, and business owners should consider whether enrolling in a community solar program is right for them. The positive economic impact of a 30% savings on their energy bills for lower socio-economic Black/African American households renting a home would be substantial and cost saving.

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN BLACK NEW MEXICO

How does a Community Solar Development serve the community?

“Community solar, also known as shared solar or solar gardens, is a distributed solar energy deployment model that allows customers to buy or lease part of a larger, off-site shared solar photovoltaic (PV) system. Community solar arrangements allow customers to enjoy advantages of solar energy without having to install their own solar energy system. Community solar projects provide an alternative to rooftop PV systems for customers who:

- Have insufficient solar resources or roof conditions to support a rooftop PV system (due to shading, roof size, or other factors)*
- Do not own their homes or buildings*
- Are unable or unwilling to install an on-site solar PV system for financial or other reasons.*

Community solar subscribers typically receive a monthly bill credit for electricity generated by their share of the solar PV system, as if the system were located on their premises.” (3)

What would be the drawback of enrolling in a community solar development? One drawback is that the Community Solar Development may not be offered in your area due the distance from the development and/or the participation of the utility company serving your area. Last year there was a case in Washington D.C. that had been active since 2022 without a resolution. The case alleged misconduct by the developer and the Utility Company. One complaint was that customers where actually overcharged consistently on their utility bills. Here are the allegations below:

District agencies, including OAG, OPC, and DOEE have been working with Pepco, trying to resolve issues around the utility’s mishandling of community solar projects for about two years, but the problems persisted. In a petition to the Public Service Commission, OAG and OPC alleged that Pepco violated District laws governing the operation of community solar programs by:

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- Failing to provide promised discounts on energy bills: Pepco was systematically failing to provide more than 6,800 District households that participate in community solar programs with timely and accurate credits on their energy bills. Residents had complained about receiving lower than expected credits, or zero credits on their bills. (It would be impossible for subscribers to receive zero credits, unless a solar facility was damaged or offline for an entire month.) Program participants had also reported receiving confusing and inaccurate bills, multiple bills for the same time-period, or incorrect bills showing they are carrying balances. Program participants also stated that it was extremely difficult to get Pepco to correct billing errors.
- Harming low-income DC residents: Pepco’s failure to properly provide credits on energy bills harmed low-income DC households who had difficulty affording their energy bills without assistance. These residents enrolled in DOEE’s Solar For All program to lower their energy bills, and when they do not receive the promised credits, they were subject to threats of having their electricity service being disconnected.
- Failing to pay DOEE and other owners of community solar generation facilities: In addition to providing credit on electric bills to subscribers of community solar generating facilities, Pepco is required to pay the owners of the facilities on a monthly basis for any “shares” of energy produced that do not belong to subscribers. These payments are intended to help cover the cost of building and operating these projects. However, Pepco had failed to pay the owners of these projects—including DOEE—what they were owed.

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- Undercounting solar energy that was being generated: Pepco was undercounting the solar energy being generated, including by unlawfully installing its own electrical meters. The unlawful and unnecessary installation of extra meters were creating delays and causing incorrect meter readings and errors.
- Undermining the District’s ability to reach its climate goals: OAG and OPC asserted that Pepco’s mishandling of community solar programs had weakened public confidence in the programs, caused financial harm to the organizations that own and operate them, and was undermining the District’s ability to meet its ambitious carbon reduction goals.

In New Mexico, the NM Public Regulation Commission had multiple complaints filed against them for how they screened and selected developers for the multiple Community Solar projects in the Albuquerque Metro Area and surrounding counties. These concerns will need to be addressed before Community Solar would be able to enroll other Black/African American communities in New Mexico in the Solar Program. Your NM Office of African American Affairs will continue to study and identify whether or not Community Solar is a viable option for Black/African American’s economic growth and thereby saving monthly on their energy costs.