

Community Power

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a community power aggregation (CPA) and how might Exeter's consumers, residential and commercial benefit from participation in Exeter's CPA?

Community power allows a community to have more control over what sources of energy are delivered to its customers through the utility and brings the opportunity to both lower cost and expand the renewable energy component of the energy supply available to Exeter customers.

In brief, Community Power Aggregation works by having a large group of customers come together to buy their energy supply directly from the producer of the energy instead of having our local utility, Unitil, buy it. Unitil would continue to distribute the energy to Exeter residents, businesses and the town. Under the CPA model, Exeter or an organization acting on the Town's behalf would do the purchasing and would have the opportunity to negotiate the energy source mix, the length of the contract and the price of the energy supplied to Unitil for use by Exeter's customers.

A large part of the reason for initiating a CPA in Exeter is to be able to offer residents and customers a higher mix of renewable energy supplies at comparatively lower costs than currently available. In addition to that, other benefits are expected in the future. A small fraction of the rate charged for energy supply will be set aside in an energy reserve fund which will accumulate over time and be available to fund energy initiatives offered to Exeter customers. These could include subsidized smart meters, residential solar incentives, energy storage and efficiency projects and even development of renewable energy projects. In many parts of the country the CPA model includes the development of local or regional renewable energy, energy storage and grid modernization projects funded through proceeds generated by the CPA.

2. Why is the Town pursuing CPA in the first place, and why now?

The Exeter Energy Committee recommended to the Select Board last spring that that the Town begin formally exploring the creation of CPA to take advantage of the potential benefits described in answer to the first question – namely – reducing the cost of the default energy supply, making more renewable energy options available to Exeter customers and, longer term, developing innovative energy projects without burdening Exeter taxpayers. The reason this is coming up now is that a change was made in 2019 to the state enabling law for CPAs (RSA 53-E) which make their formation more feasible to start and more viable to operate. The major change was to allow a CPA, once established, to enroll all retail customers in its community into the program automatically unless they opted out or were already enrolled with an alternative (non-default) energy supplier. That change means that CPAs begin with a substantial (“aggregated”) customer energy demand with which to negotiate for energy supply. As a result of this change, there has been a large uptick in CPA interest by municipalities. To date, about a

dozen communities and counties in New Hampshire, including Exeter, are actively studying and/or creating CPAs. On October 1st, a new coalition of New Hampshire municipal governments was created to help facilitate CPA formation and provide energy market expertise and broker services that will be needed for their successful operation. (See question 5)

3. How does a CPA work?

To understand how a CPA works we need to talk a little about energy deregulation. Community Power Aggregation taps into a key feature of energy utility deregulation which occurred way back in the 1990s: the separation of energy *supply* from energy *distribution*. Since energy deregulation went into effect, utilities such as Unitil have been required to divest themselves of energy production facilities (e.g. power plants) and limit their business to energy distribution (e.g. the power distribution grid, powerlines, poles, transformers, substations, etc. and related administrative functions such as metering and billing). Meanwhile energy producers develop power generating capacity, produce electricity and sell it both to utilities and to end users. Deregulation envisioned that a high level of competition would develop in the energy *supply* side of the business, as electricity customers would be free to choose between suppliers. The suppliers would need to compete on price and perhaps other features. That was the theory. In reality, this competitive market has been very slow to develop, especially for retail consumers. It exists with large energy consumers such as industries and municipalities (for example, Exeter purchases its energy for its own municipal use through a competitive bid process and pays less per kWh than the default utility rate) but most end users, including most residential customers simply get their electricity supply from the utility's 'default supplier.' A principle reason why competition never developed at the end user level is *disaggregation*. There are too many residential end users, each using too little energy to create enough demand to successfully negotiate on price.

CPAs are designed to create that large scale aggregation of retail customers that can effectively negotiate on price in the energy market.

4. What must Exeter do to form a CPA and where is it in that process?

The state law which governs the formation of CPAs, RSA 53-E, "AGGREGATION OF ELECTRIC CUSTOMERS BY MUNICIPALITIES AND COUNTIES" lays out quite specifically, what a community must do to set up a community power aggregation program. The basic steps, and our expected timeline on them are these:

1. Select Board establishes an Electric Aggregation Committee: Exeter did this in May, 2021, established as the Exeter Community Power Aggregation Committee (ECPAC)
2. The ECPAC prepares a Draft Community Power Aggregation Plan: In progress. The ECPAC started this in July and the draft is expected to be completed in November.
3. The Select Board will review and consider the Aggregation Plan and determine whether to present this to the Town legislative body for approval at the March Town Meeting: to be determined
4. Town Meeting approves or rejects the Community Power Plan and Program in March 2022

5. If approved, the Town submits the Community Power Program to the PUC and/or State Energy Commission for approval: expected in April-June 2022
6. Implementation of the Program begins in accordance with the Plan: begins following PUC approval
7. The Town contracts with the Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire or other third party to provide services to implement the plan, including acquiring contracts for electric energy delivery.
8. If energy costs are at or below existing default energy rates, program is launched for eligible customers in Exeter

5. Exeter is a member of the Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire. Can you explain what the Coalition is and what role they may have in Exeter's CPA.

The Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire is a newly incorporated public entity in New Hampshire formed under RSA 53-A which allows municipalities and counties in NH to work in combination to perform any task or duty they can do individually. CPCNH has been incorporated with 12 initial member municipalities, including Exeter, to assist towns in NH who undertake community power programs. As envisioned, they will provide four key services: first to provide technical assistance to towns who are developing community power programs; second to aggregate electricity demand from member communities who choose to participate to create greater bargaining power when purchasing electric power contracts, third to provide technical services to towns such as purchasing power contracts, and establishing risk management strategies and reserves to respond to volatility in electricity markets, and fourth, to develop innovative alternative energy, grid modernization and other projects in which member communities can choose to participate. Exeter is one of the initial incorporating members of the coalition. Although a member of the Coalition, Exeter is not committed to use its services if and when it implements its community power program. We can choose to contract with another community power service provider if we choose. The coalition will be funded from revenues generated from its power contracts. No local taxpayer funds will be used.

6. If Exeter's energy aggregation plan (EAP) is approved by the Select Board and adopted by town vote at Town Meeting, will I be required to participate in the community power program? How will customers be notified and can they decide not to participate in Exeter Community Power if they so choose?

In a word, NO, you will not be required to participate in the Exeter Community Power program. However, you will be automatically included unless you opt out. But the law is very clear on this point: all customers must be given ample notice (notice which must include the electric rates offered under the program mailed to every Unitil customer) and adequate timeframe (at least 30 days) to choose to opt out. You will also have the ability to opt out of the program later if you choose. If you already receive power from an alternative provider, you will not be included in Exeter's program unless to choose to opt in. And remember, the Community Power program will not launch if the default energy rate we offer is not equal to or below that of the utility default rate.

7. Unitil is the utility that currently supplies Exeter’s electricity needs. What services does Unitil provide now and how will its role change if Exeter forms a CPA and adopts an energy aggregation plan?

Unitil’s role will largely remain the same as now. It will still provide the distribution of energy to your home or business and will continue to handle billing for electricity. It will also still provide the default electricity supplier for those who choose to opt out of Exeter’s program. The main difference for those who don’t opt out is that the electric supplier charges (included as a line item in your bill) will come from Exeter Community Power instead of Unitil’s default supplier.

8. Can you explain a little more about the difference between electric delivery charges and electric supplier charges that I currently see on my Unitil bill? What will change on my bill if I decide to participate in Exeter Community Power?

The only change (unless you have opted-out) will be that the portion of your bill labeled “ELECTRIC SUPPLIER SERVICE” will change from the default supplier to Exeter Community Power and may indicate the specific power option you have chosen (for example a higher renewable energy source mix). The “ELECTRIC SERVICE” portion of your bill (including “Customer Charge”, “Delivery Charge”, and “Stranded Cost Charge” will remain unchanged.

9. What choice will individual consumers have concerning the source of their electric supply? Will individual customers be able to choose options with varying amounts of renewable energy?

As mentioned earlier, a major reason that Community Power is being developed by Exeter is to provide electric customers greater opportunity to choose a larger portion of renewable energy in the “Energy Supplier” portion of their bill. Our intention is to offer two or three new mixes in addition to the default supply equivalent. The current default supply includes about 20% in renewable sources. We intend to add one ‘tier’ that includes about 50% renewable sources and another with a much greater portion of renewable sources – perhaps 90% or more.

10. How will low-income customers be accommodated

We don’t anticipate there will be any change in assistance available to low-income households as a result of shifting to a community power energy supplier model. The statewide Electric Assistance Program (EAP) provides qualifying customers with a discount on their monthly electric bill ranging from 8% to 76% depending on income and other factors. The New Hampshire Legislature authorized funding for this statewide program as part of electric utility deregulation back in the 1990s. Since then, all electric utility ratepayers support the statewide EAP through the System Benefits Charge (SBC) portion of their monthly electric bill. Funds to support the energy assistance program available to Exeter residents will continue to be available through Southern New Hampshire Services throughout the state to identify and enroll eligible customers for the statewide EAP. Other energy assistance programs for weatherization efficiency upgrades under the NHSaves program will be unchanged.

11. *If Exeter adopts an energy aggregation plan (EAP) that authorizes its CPA to work with vendors to purchase electricity for the town's residents and businesses, what are the risks to those residential and commercial customers?*

The risk to customers is small. While it is certainly true that energy markets can be volatile and contracted costs for energy can swing significantly, Exeter Community Power will not be purchasing power directly, but rather through a third-party broker, either CPCNH or a private entity. A key part of the services provided by that broker is the management of energy pricing risk and hedging against this volatility. In addition, customers will be allowed to change their energy supplier either back to Unitil's default or to another energy supplier on either a monthly or quarterly basis.

12. *Currently Unitil and the PUC set the rates for its electricity customers. Who will set the rates if Exeter forms a CPA?*

Exeter Community Power will establish the rate for only the 'Energy Supply' portion of customer's electricity bill. The remainder consists of Electric Service charges (made up of customer charge, delivery charge, stranded cost charge, system benefits charge and taxes) are set by the utility and the PUC. For a New Hampshire household with the average electric energy demand of 630 kWh/month, at current Unitil rates, the energy supply portion would consist of about 39% on the monthly bill with the balance being electric delivery and service charges.

13. *Have other communities in New Hampshire established CPAs and if so, where are they in the process and how successful have they been?*

This is rapidly evolving, but as of mid October 2021, at least four other communities in New Hampshire are well along in the process of establishing community power programs, including Keene, Harrisville, Lebanon, and Hanover. All have drafted their Electric Aggregation Plans, and Keene has approved and launched its program using Standard Power/Good Energy as their energy broker/service provider. A total of fourteen NH municipalities have formally joined the CPCNH to support development of their community power programs: Hanover, Lebanon, Exeter, Nashua, Harrisville, Rye, Dover, Warner, Walpole, Newmarket, Plainfield, Durham, Enfield, and Cheshire County.

14. *If it goes forward, when do you expect Exeter's CPA to begin.*

Based on the timeline the ECPAC has developed, we expect the Exeter Community Power Aggregation program to be considered by the Select Board this December or January, and for approval by Town Meeting in March 2022. If approved, and with the approval of our Energy Aggregation Plan by the PUC, we anticipate contracting for energy services in Summer of 2022 and beginning to provide energy supply services to Exeter customers in the Fall 2022 / Winter 2023. This schedule is tentative and may be delayed by the approval and roll out process governed by the PUC and the newly formed NH Department of Energy, and/or the availability of energy services provided through CPCNH and other providers.