

Julia Bassett Schwerin
CAPE ELIZABETH
LD 359

Testimony for LD 257, Testimony for LD 32, Testimony for LD 450, Testimony for LD 359

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Cape Elizabeth

Senator Lawrence, Representative Sachs, and honorable members of the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony against all four of the bills seeking to terminate net energy billing.

My name is Julia Bassett Schwerin, and I am a Green real estate Broker living in Cape Elizabeth. I am testifying as an individual and not on behalf of my company or trade association. I will stay in my residential real estate wheelhouse and address Net Energy Billing (NEB) for rooftop solar, which I estimate to be around 15,000 roofs in the state at present. NEB went into effect in 2019, so I'm assuming the majority of these solar systems were installed with that deal in effect and that virtually everyone signed up for it.

I feel we are being unfairly characterized as solar owners (and I am one since 2021) who are enjoying our choice of liberal curb appeal at the expense of those forced to resort to foraging for firewood felled by Nor'easters to keep warm. On the contrary, investing in solar is a good investment, albeit with a kind of long (7-10 year) payback period, that makes a contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and supports our climate goals in Maine Won't Wait, our climate action plan.

Solar systems installed in the last five years since NEB was enacted were all sized to make more energy than their buildings needed during the day so they could send extra kW to the grid in the summer months, break even in the spring and fall, and get the energy back at night and during the winter months. Speaking for myself, I believe our electricity is useful for CMP, that it avoids them using natural gas, and it overlaps a large portion of high demand time; plus we pay hundreds of dollars a year in fees for the privilege.

If I understand it correctly, CMP views the arrangement as a loss of delivery charges and is making the other ratepayers pay for it. In fact, the very first thing customers see on the CMP bill is a disclaimer stating that \$15 of their bill is going to pay for stupid liberal policy choices like "subsidizing net metering, low-income households, and energy efficiency" for childless cat ladies. Sorry for the snarky interpretation, but this characterization is very troubling to me, as I never intended to take advantage of anyone. On the other hand, the Maine Public Utility Commission reports that, for every \$1 NEB costs, \$1.23 is earned, so I guess there must actually be some benefits going overlooked in this effort to right the wrong with four – yes, that's 4 – bills proposed to repeal net metering in this legislative session.

There are three things I would say from the built environment perspective, as a designated Green real estate broker with over 20 years' experience practicing full time in southern Maine.

1. Buildings currently use 39% of the energy in our state. We are doing pretty well at getting building owners to invest in solar with these two incentives, net metering and to a much lesser extent, property tax exemptions, and not so great with large scale interconnects, which are being backed up for many years due to poor planning and investment on the part of a utility who failed to see this coming. We are a state that enjoys pretty low home insurance rates – for now – despite having just been hammered by back-to-back storms costing half a billion dollars in damages and climbing. But we are the proverbial frog in the kettle as increasingly harmful effects of burning fossil fuels include collapse of our fisheries, agriculture and ecosystems; sea level rise of four feet within the lifetime of the children now being born; and the total loss of beaches, winter skiing, snowmobiling and ice fishing, our tourism economy, and loss of the most valuable real estate in the state along our waterfront. Please: don't be the ones who blow it for future generations by killing rooftop solar investment that is swapping clean energy for dirty.

2. Why? Because that's what the loss of net energy billing will do and depending on corollary events like the dismantling of the Inflation Reduction Act tax credit, it means extending the payback period from 7-10 years to 15-20 years and these setbacks will effectively make solar investment unattractive. Why? Because without it, solar owners will also have to be large back-up battery owners, and that will double the cost of a solar rooftop system and the resulting payback period. Multiple batteries are required because one back-up battery can keep the lights and the fridge on for a day or two, but not run the mini splits, the air exchanger or the Heat Pump water heater. That requires 3-5 batteries assuming the solar array is not covered with snow, or the atmosphere is not cloudy from geoengineering. And what is to be the alternative? In the worst-case scenario, meaning where you have to pay CMP the most, the amount you would have to pay for transmission charges for your energy coming and going and without the benefit of the tax credit over ten years, you could buy eight batteries instead. Believe me, I would do it even if I had to borrow the money, rather than pay CMP. It is like the difference between buying and renting a house. Even in the best case where the tax credit somehow holds, CMP only raises their rates 20% once every three years instead of every year, and you only have to pay for the delivery of the electrons they send you not the ones you send them, the amount you would have to pay CMP over ten years I figure could buy four batteries, enough to keep the household intact in most scenarios except those I do not want to contemplate. I don't want to see a back-order of batteries like ordering a generator was in 1999 (2001 delivery, thanks Y2K).

3. I must circle back to the planet here to close my testimony. The census has Maine at 751,800 houses in 2022, and that includes about 250,000 second homes that are camps, beach condos, and AirBNBs. We are talking about 3% of the homes occupied full time in Maine having a solar array, by my estimate, which is not at all past the time of needing nurturing. Net Energy Billing, in my opinion, is being blown way out of proportion as a burden on ratepayers and being made the scapegoat for all the many problems citizens have with affordable energy in particular and affordable housing in general. But if it is to fall because it is open season on killing climate change initiatives, then batteries, not CMP, will be the beneficiaries, and it won't be the batteries that used to be popular back in 2021 when I got mine. Beyond that, rooftop solar will be suffocated without net energy billing because of the cost of the many batteries that will be needed and the high interest rates on loans to pay for them. We have an awesome resource in Efficiency Maine incentivizing heat pumps and weatherization, vetting installers and educating consumers, but I don't see them stepping up to incentivize solar or back-up batteries. We have a tremendous leadership coalition in the Maine Climate Council and they're working though what our state needs to do to play our part in saving our planet, but their focus is on mitigation and resilience.

In conclusion, renewable energy is the lifeline we need to all be throwing to everyone using fossil fuels to heat their homes. We need to nurture it, and make sure that it supplants fossil fuel as an energy source for power, because the sun and wind can be harnessed with no destructive forces to the earth's continued existence in balance, and when critical mass is reached, they can do so very cost effectively. The cost of investing in sustainable and resilient buildings will, in my opinion as a recovering economist, be far more cost effective than paying for ever increasing catastrophes. We should make no mistake: between droughts, scorching heat and wildfires; floods, sea level rise and severe storms; and climate migration by a large mass of the world's population in search of food and water, the coming years will ask of each of us, what did you do to save our Mother Earth? American Indians say their role is to preserve the lands for the next seven generations. We are scorching ours before our eyes to profit the oil oligarchs and their employees, who are many of our politicians. God help those who are doing all they can to avoid the worst.

I am testifying against this bill, and all four bills seeking to end net energy billing. Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective.