

Smart electricity meters to be tested for accuracy

By TOM FOWLER Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle

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State power regulators will hire an outside firm to test recently installed smart meters in Houston and elsewhere to determine whether they are accurately tracking home and business electricity usage.

The Public Utility Commission voted on the measure Thursday after requests for such testing — first from Sen. Troy Fraser, R-Horseshoe Bay, and then from CenterPoint Energy and Oncor.

The two companies operate the lines, substations and other equipment that distribute and measure electricity customers purchase from competitive retail providers.

Oncor has installed about 700,000 smart meters in its North Texas territory, with plans to reach 3.4 million homes and businesses.

CenterPoint has installed about 230,000 of the meters in the Houston area and plans to add them for all 2.2 million of its customers by 2012.

Company spokesman Floyd LeBlanc said CenterPoint is “extremely confident” in the accuracy of the meters but will take part in the third-party testing.

The new meters can be monitored and controlled remotely, helping grid operators monitor the system and respond to outages more quickly.

They also can communicate with a new generation of in-home devices that give customers more information about their power usage and costs, ultimately helping to lower usage, advocates for the technology say.

Fraser said his request was sparked by complaints from hundreds of constituents who believe their bills have been higher since the digital devices were installed over the past year.

Fraser asked the PUC to suspend all new installations and the \$2.21 per month fee Oncor charges customers for the meters, but the PUC did not agree to those measures, commission spokesman Terry Hadley said.

CenterPoint is charging Houston-area customers \$3.24 per month for the units, but that price will likely drop because the company received a \$200 million federal stimulus grant to speed up the meter roll-out.

CenterPoint also has received a number of customer complaints about the accuracy of the new meters, but the problems are being addressed as they are reported and often aren't the fault of bad equipment, the company says.

Maria Pineda, who manages an apartment complex in northeast Houston, says tenant electric bills there have doubled since CenterPoint installed smart meters in October.

“Residents are getting \$300 to \$400 bills,” she said. “Most of my tenants are on food stamps, and those bills are just outrageous.”

She said six tenants have moved out because they couldn't afford their electric bills. CenterPoint spokeswoman Leticia Lowe said it doesn't appear the meters at the apartment complex were faulty. Rather, a spike in energy use at the complex matches the cold spell that hit the area in early January.

The apartments all have electric heat, she said, and the billing cycle that showed up on January bills was longer because of the holidays — 34 to 35 days versus the typical 29 to 30 days.

Purva Patel contributed to this story.

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