
From: Nadine Robinson [REDACTED]
Sent: May 1, 2012 5:26 PM
To: BoardSec
Subject: Rate increase Sault Ste. Marie PUC letter of comment

Ontario Energy Board

May 1, 2012

[REDACTED]

Please accept the following articles attached below I've written for the Sault Star as a letter of comment for the SSMPUC rate increase proceedings.

In addition, please consider that a few years ago the cable companies (Shaw being one of them) tried to sneak in extra charges using what I believe was called passive acceptance. You will recall they advised customers they were going to add additional channels unless customers specifically advised that they were not wanted. Of course, our bill was going to increase at the same time. The government stepped in and that action was reversed.

Finally, given that the MPP for the area is David Oraziotti who tabled a bill mandating more clarity re: hidden fees (in this case for cell phones). I would think that at a minimum we deserve a big apology, but really we deserve the right to say whether we want these meters or not.

I am all about conservation, but the old way of billing us more once we reached a certain amount motivated me to conserve more than this TOU method. I agree that you have to hit people in the pocketbook to make them conserve, but at least be upfront about it! I agree that smart meters may be the wave of the future, but have to say that the concerns over radiation that they emit, and the false billing is a big worry to me, on top of the fact that we had no choice in the matter and are now being handed the bill.

Bottom line, I am against the proposed rate increase!

Regards,
Nadine Robinson
[REDACTED]

How smart are we if we continue to agree to pay for smart meters? — ROBINSON COLUMN

<http://www.saultstar.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3543885>

By Nadine Robinson

Posted 6 days ago

In my last column I expressed my opposition to the PUC's application to recover smart meter costs from us through an increase in our delivery charges. Not surprisingly, Brian Curran, president and CEO of PUC, wasn't a big fan of my column.

Curran replied in a letter in which he let people know that smart electrical meters were mandated by the provincial government. No one is arguing that.

Just because something gets handed down by the provincial government doesn't mean that we have to like it or go along with it. Does anyone remember the whole eco-fee fiasco? That got overturned quickly when people realized what a train wreck it was.

Perhaps we're a little bit slower this time, but now many of us are realizing that time-of-use pricing isn't about conservation, it's about maximizing provincial coffers, and we shouldn't have to pay for the meters for them to do so.

Then Curran says that "smart meters (are) the wave of the future in the electricity sector. They are the basis of the evolution of the smart grid." If smart grids are anything like smart meters, we best prepare ourselves for our wallets to "smart" because a smart grid sure sounds a lot more expensive. Also, one has to ask if it is really the future. Look at all the dissension in B.C. right now over smart meters.

I truly hope that we get more full information on how smart grids will benefit and cost us before such "progress" continues.

To that point, I've asked PUC to show me where the marketing material states that we'd be billed for the smart meters. I went through all the information I had, and readers sent me a bunch as well, and nowhere could I find it say we would be charged for them.

To be fair, the province also seems to have forgotten to tell consumers that we'd be charged for the smart meters when they mandated them. Did they expect the PUC's of the province to do their dirty work? Regardless, both the province and local utilities forgot to enter into a contract with us, the consumers.

Imagine going to Las Vegas, where you enjoy free drinks in the casino and are given tickets to a show. Then at check out, there is an "entertainment recovery" charge on your bill. Alternatively, and closer to home, what if you went into the LCBO and bought a bottle of wine that had a free mini bottle attached. Later that day you discover that there is a "free sample recovery fee" on your receipt. Isn't it dancing on the unethical to give somebody something and later sneak them an invoice for it?

According to the Ontario Energy Board, there are 16 applications before it now, and that leaves dozens that haven't applied. I'm naive enough to hope that at least some of the community utility providers that haven't asked for rate increases realize that you either tell people about charges they will incur upfront clearly, or you absorb the costs.

A point I will absolutely concede to Curran is that their financial statements, being consolidated, are tough to interpret. The numbers that Curran quote in his letter are not available on the PUC website. I provided an opinion based on the information that was available.

He also mentions that \$260,000 of the community relations costs were for conservation programs and "all of these costs were recovered from OPA." Perhaps PUC can use that money to go toward paying for the smart meters as the devices are supposedly all about "conservation."

Finally, Curran's tone gets surprisingly nasty. I say surprisingly because this isn't personal. I've always respected Brian and all PUC employees I've met. The City of Sault Ste. Marie is PUC's sole shareholder, so by extension, we all have a right to raise customer/shareholder concerns and we should expect to be dealt with professionally. (I should mention I did contact/leave a message with PUC staff before my last column, but, although many of us were working Easter Monday, PUC was not.)

I'd like to truly thank all of the people who wrote to me opposing the rate increase, including a large majority who copied PUC, city councillors, and our MPP. I'd particularly like to thank those who also contacted me after Mr. Curran's reply with words like: "You must be doing your job if they are trying so hard to discredit you, Nadine. Keep up the good work."

We didn't ask for smart meters, so why tap us for cash? — ROBINSON COLUMN

<http://www.saultstar.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3530246>

By Nadine Robinson

Posted 20 days ago

The PUC wants to increase delivery charges starting May 1, "to reflect the recovery of costs for deployed smart meters." Did we ask for those meters? Are they of any benefit to us? No and no.

Last Thursday's paper had a very large ad: "Notice of application for an electricity distribution rate change - PUC Distribution Inc."

If approved, the average impact will be an increase of \$3.42 per month for the next 12 months, it said. That's \$41.04 more per year for something we didn't want in the first place. Given the 29,385 meters already installed, PUC will be clawing back \$1,205,960 over 12 months.

If you ask me, PUC should not be taking that money from us. It had pretty tidy net earnings for the past three years running, and taking a quick peek at PUC annual reports, I'd say there are a few places the corporation could look for that money other than in the pockets of cash-strapped senior citizens and many others on fixed incomes.

For example, there was an \$896,000 increase in administration expenses from 2009 to 2010, and comparing 2010 to 2008 the increase is \$1,102,000. Cutting back administration costs to 2008 levels would almost eliminate the need to call on us for more money. (I'd jab them about the number of PUC employees on the sunshine list, but I can't find any on it. Perhaps that's why PUC incorporated, to avoid being criticized for its hefty wages?)

Even with trimming the administrative fat, the PUC would still be short about \$100,000. Wait, we've heard that number recently in relation to PUC — in Doug Millroy's column. It was that donation made by the PUC that was questioned, not in terms of merit, but in the spirit of that not being its money to spend. The city is the sole shareholder of PUC, and we make up the city, so perhaps if PUC didn't decide how to spend our money in the community, especially providing donations to those who seem to not be arms length, it would have all the money it needed for the smart meters.

Digging deeper in this regard, community relations expense on the income statement in 2010 (\$976,800) now floats at 147% of the 2006 amount (\$663,046), which represents a \$313,754 difference.

PUC, you don't need to tap us for cash. Physician heal thyself.

I'm sorry, but I'm not convinced that these proposed rate increases are for smart meter recovery. Perhaps this latest increase is to begin paying for that shiny new building being erecting on Second Line - leaving yet another downtown building vacant? Or should we all brace ourselves for the rate increases proposed when the final invoice is received on the building?

While I'm on the subject, is now really the time to build a new facility when the annual reports keep talking about "a significant portion of our system is now more than 40 years old and needs to be replaced?" Wouldn't it be wiser to invest in shiny new wires instead of nice corner offices?

Given how complex these applications are, I may have misunderstood something, but regardless, there are facts that are undeniable: We thought smart meters were going to help us conserve the money in our wallets, and conserve energy, but now, not only are they costing us extra in terms of billing rates, we are also being asked to pay for the privilege.

Boo.

We own the PUC, so it is up to us to intervene.

Last week's big ad says we can participate in the hearing as an intervener, an observer, or send letters of comment. We only have 10 days from the date of publication to request intervener or observer status, and only have 30 days to send letters of comment, otherwise it will all be done and we can watch our bills go up, again, May 1.

E-mail me if you want the information on how to become a participant. Or better yet, e-mail PUC's jennifer.uchmanowicz@smpuc.com 705-759-3009 (and copy me). But do it fast, time is ticking — only four days left.

The history page of the PUC's website says it was formed in 1917 and the "public utility was both owned by and accountable to its customers, a public utility commission ensured the supply of power and water at the lowest possible cost with service responsive to local needs."

Lowest possible cost? Responsive to local needs?

This is leaving a bad taste in my mouth - and it's not just the free chlorine that is making me feel tapped.

Nadine Robinson is a freelance writer and can be reached at [REDACTED] Her column appears every second Wednesday.