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'SmartMeters' power up

by RICK NORTON, Associate Editor
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Cleveland Utilities electric crews and a contractor have installed more than 4,990 Automated Meter Reading units in a conversion expected to take three years before all 30,000 residential and commercial meters have been set.

The so-called SmartMeters — which bear this nickname because of their compatibility with the national high-tech Smart Grid electric system and its ability to remote-read power use by

homes and businesses — are being installed by CU in three phases.

The first stage will include 10,000 AMRs and should be completed within four to six months, according to Walt Vineyard, manager of CU Information Technology.

Following a 500-meter test period, Cleveland Utilities received bids for the opening phase of installation and awarded the contract on March 31 to Apex CoVantage at a cost of \$104,287.04. The initial phase kicked off June 27, and since that time the contractor and CU crews have installed 5,000 units, including the initial 500 that made up the test batch.

“It’s going great,” Vineyard said. “The contract crew is making great progress. The process is moving along and we are pleased [with the results].”

The AMR conversion project was slowed by the April 27 storms and the subsequent period of disaster recovery; however, conversion crews are now at full capacity, Vineyard explained.

Vineyard said the AMRs are being installed in several different neighborhoods simultaneously. Once installed, they are fully functional; however, for now CU is taking “dual readings,” meaning that meter readers in the field are still taking manual readings. Results are also being remote-fed by the AMRs. The dual readings will continue until CU is ready to rely exclusively on the newly converted meters, Vineyard said.

“At some point, we’ll make the decision to take just the remote reading, but at this point we are continuing to dual-read the systems,” he said.

Tom Wheeler, CU general manager, said the public utility is converting to AMRs for two reasons, including:

1. To allow the remote reading of the meters to cut down on meter-reading expense; and

2. To allow CU to meter the new Time-of-Use Electric Rate structures that are being implemented on the retail level in the near future. TVA is already billing CU on the wholesale level using Time-of-Use rates.

Wheeler said the high-tech AMRs are being deployed under the provisions of the U.S. Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007.

"This act was passed by the Bush administration in 2007 to help cut our dependence as a nation on foreign oil, reduce our greenhouse emissions and modernize our national electric grid," Wheeler said. "One major component of the Smart Grid is that this type of grid would create a system that would allow the use of distributed generation instead of the present concept of only central power plant production of electricity."

He added, "Distributed generation could be other forms of electricity production such as solar, wind and biomass."

Wheeler also stressed the AMR units provide only the remote-reading of customers' power usage. They are not being used by Cleveland Utilities for other purposes.

"The meters we are installing do not have the ability to control our customers' appliances and equipment," Wheeler said.

He was referring to prior concerns from special-interest groups that allege SmartMeters can be used by utility companies to control the volume and timing of power use by customers, as well as when and how home appliances are used. Such complaints have been made locally to the Cleveland Board of Public Utilities by members of the Bradley County Tea Party.

Critics such as the Tea Party also allege SmartMeters are an invasion of privacy and in some cases could be a health hazard.

Vineyard pointed out CU and the contractor are trying to notify customers prior to installing the new AMRs in their homes or businesses because it requires a temporary power shutdown; plus, the local utility is striving to make certain customers are aware of the meter conversion.

"The Apex CoVantage employees have Apex photo IDs with them along with a CU-issued meter installation contractor ID card," Vineyard said. "The contractor will attempt to contact each customer before actually performing the change-out of the meter to inform them of the brief power outage needed for the change-out."

Vineyard urged customers to contact Cleveland Utilities at 472-4521 if they have any questions about the meter conversion process or the CU and Apex crew members who are making the change-outs.

"This entire phase is being managed by the Electric Operations Department, especially the Meter Department which is working directly with Customer Billing

to facilitate all the changes to our system records," Vineyard explained.

Vineyard urged residents to ask for ID if they are approached by meter conversion crews and to contact CU for verification if they have further questions.

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