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CU installing SmartMeters, explains process

by RICK NORTON, Associate Editor
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Installation of SmartMeter technology to cut meter-reading costs and to prepare for the 2012 implementation of time-of-use energy pricing by TVA is on schedule and is not a futuristic “Big Brother” approach for controlling customers’ private lives, according to Cleveland Utilities leaders.

Tom Wheeler, CU general manager, said the local utility launched a SmartMeter testing phase in early November that will include 500 private meters, most of which are residential though a few will be commercial.

Currently, some 275 of the meters have been installed. The remainder should be placed by the end of February 2011 in time for the program to go live March 1, according to Bart Borden, operations manager of CU’s Electric Division.



Most of the SmartMeter installations are taking place in the Valleyhead and Burlington subdivision areas. Borden

said this includes homes, and a few businesses, along Peerless Road, Mouse Creek Road, Paul Huff Parkway, and the Burlington Heights and Mohawk areas.

“We’re knocking on every door and notifying the customers (of the SmartMeter installation),” Borden said. “We’ve selected meter-reading routes ... groups that would normally be read within one day.”

The SmartMeter test units are not yet automatically disseminating energy-use information via CU’s fiber-optic backbone that was installed several months ago.

“We’re not communicating with them (the new meters) yet; that’s part of this whole test,” Borden explained. “We’re continuing to work on the communications part to get them installed.” Until the meters go live, customers will still be able to read their meters on the display as always, he added.

Walt Vineyard, information technology (IT) manager for Cleveland Utilities, pointed out, “We’ll be fine-tuning the entire process through the testing period.”

CU leaders issued the SmartMeter update in an interview with the Cleveland

Daily Banner in response to consumer concerns sparked in part by national news outlets — primarily via the Internet — that are alleging the technology to be a radiation-producing health hazard due to Radio Frequency waves. Some organizations are also linking SmartMeters to increasing the risk of home fires and short-circuiting electrical appliances.

Wheeler said fliers are being distributed in the Cleveland and Bradley County community charging SmartMeter technology with being an invasion of privacy. One such flier was hand-delivered to Cleveland Utilities by an unnamed woman who identified herself as representing the Bradley County Tea Party, according to Borden and Vineyard. This could not be independently verified by the Banner.

The flier does not identify any organization by name, but its heading reads, “Warning To All Residents of Cleveland, Tennessee.”

The document reads, “STOP Cleveland Utilities, the City of Cleveland (and) the Obama Administration from the efforts to replace your current meter with a SmartMeter. Unless you speak out to STOP this government control, every home and business in Cleveland, Tennessee without vote, consent, right to refuse or opt out will be FORCED to take the SmartMeter. Do you even know what this meter can do, or the risk to privacy, security and to health?”

The flier alleges SmartMeter technology is “... the federal government’s big play for control of every American’s use of energy.”

It adds, “They seek the ability to control appliances, electronics, choice within your home. Through a SmartMeter, you can ultimately lose the freedom to choose how you use energy, what temperature you want inside your home, when you cook, do dishes, wash clothes, etc. The Obama Administration, the United Nations (and) climate change activists have found a way to gain control and to force the American people to submit to their (carbon dioxide) reducing measures.”

The document alleges SmartMeter technology will eventually lead to a “skyrocket” of utility rates and that the “ultimate goal” of those backing it is for a “... socialist United States.”

Wheeler said public utility companies are aware that certain organizations — the American Tea Party being one of them — and some individuals are attacking SmartMeter technology as a national issue.

Although SmartMeter technology is perceived as new, it is actually 15 years old, at least, Wheeler explained.

“We started down this road several years ago ... a lot of utilities did,” he said. “When we started it was called Automatic Meter Reading.” The concept’s title later changed to Automatic Meter Information and now it has evolved to SmartMeters, Wheeler noted.

Cleveland Utilities has analyzed the technology for the past decade and recently

made the decision to actively pursue it for two reasons — one, to cut meter-reading costs because SmartMeters are read remotely without additional manpower; and two, in 2012 TVA will implement a new series of time-of-use electrical rates and SmartMeters, or similar types of units, will be required to bill customers for this kind of energy use.

Time-of-use rates is a term meaning that electricity used in peak periods will be more expensive than that used in non-peak periods. Peak periods in the summer will be late afternoon and early evening, and wintertime peak periods will be early morning, Wheeler explained.

Wheeler addressed other issues about SmartMeter technology discussed in the local flier. Some include:

n Privacy: The flier claims SmartMeters will be able to control temperature settings, appliance use and other electricity-related functions operated by homeowners or businesses. “... That is totally not correct,” Wheeler said. “This meter we’re putting in will not control anything in the residence. We won’t be able to control anything. It will still be up to the customer to use whatever energy they want to use and whenever they want to use it. That will not change at all.”

n Energy Rationing: The flier claims SmartMeters can dole out allotted amounts of electricity used by customers. “We would have no way of doing this,” Wheeler said.

n Stimulus Money: The flier states that federal stimulus money is being used to pay for SmartMeter implementation within utility companies. “We’re not taking any money from anybody to do this,” Wheeler said. “It’s going to be paid for with local funds and hopefully some of the offset to help pay for it will be in reduced meter-reading expenses.” He added, “No stimulus money is being used at all (for this program).”

n A Product of the Obama Administration: The flier links the current White House administration with originating the SmartMeter technology in an effort to better control Americans’ lives through socialistic trends. Wheeler pointed out, “This (technology) is not a new concept at all. It’s certainly not a product of the Obama administration.” The original technology arrived in the early- to mid-1990s, he said. Wheeler acknowledged, “He (Obama) has picked up on it, but it (technology) was there long before he came into office.”

n Higher Electric Rates: This claim is also disputed by Wheeler who said time-of-use rates by TVA will result in higher electrical rates at certain times of the day depending on the season, but this has nothing to do with the SmartMeter. In some cases, a SmartMeter could result in higher utility bills if a customer’s old meter was not functioning properly due to age, he said.

n Health Hazard: The flier cites RF (Radio Frequency) waves as being dangerous to customers because of radiation. Wheeler said the amount is minimal and also pointed to the fact that the SmartMeter is located outside, not inside the home. He quoted from an Internet posting by Pacific Gas & Electric on its website which

addressed the RF factor: “Consider that SmartMeters transmit only about 45 seconds a day. You’d have to have one of our meters on your home or business for more than 1,000 years to get as much exposure to radio waves as a typical cell phone user gets in just one month.”

n Home Fires: In spite of flier claims, Wheeler said SmartMeters cannot be linked to home fires. In the case of a meter-related home fire, it is likely a deteriorating meter base on which a new electric meter is attached, he said. CU personnel are checking meter bases carefully during the SmartMeter installations and will continue to do so once full deployment begins in March. If a faulty meter base is discovered, the customer will be notified. (The meter base is the property of the homeowner; the meter itself is owned by CU). Borden explained, “We are inspecting all the meter bases as we make these meter changes. If we see a problem or issue with a meter base, we’ll notify the customer. Our plans are to do this in the form of a letter. If it’s something that requires immediate attention, we will work with that customer and that customer’s electrician.”

n Appliances Short-Circuiting: Wheeler said SmartMeters do not damage appliances. Long periods of turning power off and on can damage appliances, but not installing a SmartMeter, he said.

“It’s (SmartMeters) a new program, a new technology (to customers) so people have concerns about it and that’s not unusual,” Wheeler said. “What we will try to do is address people’s concerns as they come up.”

He added, “At Cleveland Utilities, we certainly have no ulterior motive in putting in SmartMeters.”

Wheeler reminded those who link SmartMeters to home, appliance and health risks that Cleveland Utilities administrators, staff and employees will also have them installed in their homes.

Once CU’s testing phase is completed, the full deployment of some 30,000 or more SmartMeters will begin March 1 and will continue over a 2 1/2-year period.

Wheeler encouraged individuals, groups or organizations to contact Cleveland Utilities if they have questions about SmartMeter technology or implementation plans.

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