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Tea Party, CU debate SmartMeters

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Installing SmartMeters in the homes and businesses of almost 30,000 Cleveland Utilities customers over the next 2 1/2 years will serve two functions — to reduce meter-reading costs and to prepare for a new time-of-use electrical rate to be implemented by TVA in 2012.

Tom Wheeler, CU general manager, offered this point repeatedly during a 45-minute debate Wednesday when representatives from the Bradley County Tea Party described the new technology as a “Big Brother” approach that they allege invades customer privacy, poses unnecessary health risks and provides a potential stepping stone for what they view as a further infringement on individual rights.

The stage was the monthly formal session of the Cleveland Utilities board of directors. The players were the local utility that launched its SmartMeter test phase in early November and a group of politically charged advocates who described themselves as CU customers asking to opt out of the new technology.

One speaker, identifying herself as Cindy Turpin, told CU board members SmartMeter technology is landing customer criticism in other countries like Canada and the Netherlands, and several states such as Maine, California and Texas, among others.

Customer outcry, she said, has led certain governmental jurisdictions to pass ordinances banning SmartMeter use or in some cases forced public utilities such as Pacific Gas & Electric on the West Coast to compromise by allowing customers to opt out of the technology.

“The reason we’re putting these meters in is to be able to bill the time-of-use rates that are going to be mandatory,” Wheeler responded to a trio of Tea Party speakers that also included Bradley County organizer Donny Harwood, and Royal Oaks Subdivision resident Barbara Gilbert. “If the Tea Party or whomever talks TVA out of implementing these time-of-use rates then we may not put these meters in.”

Wheeler acknowledged the speakers’ concerns but stressed their time and energy would be better spent talking with higher-ranking decision-makers at the federal utility which is launching the new electric rate schedule.

In defending CU’s decision to launch the SmartMeter initiative, Wheeler said the local utility has been studying its feasibility for the past several years and that the decision to pursue it was finally made after TVA announced the new 2012 rate schedule. The new TVA plan will price electrical consumption on time-of-use; that is, periods of peak use will be priced higher than periods of non-peak use.

Wheeler said the SmartMeter technology that CU has purchased cannot communicate with interior appliances nor can it regulate customers’ energy consumption. Both are claims staked by SmartMeter opponents, including those

who addressed the CU board Wednesday.

“We’ve all heard where this SmartGrid (of which the SmartMeter is a part) may be headed,” Wheeler acknowledged. “It may be headed to where appliances can talk to the meter and cut off when (electrical) prices are high and cut on when the prices are low. That may happen, but the meters we purchased do not have the capacity to do anything past the meter.”

Gilbert urged Cleveland Utilities to hear the opinions of its customers before embarking on the SmartMeter campaign.

“... People are becoming very skeptical, very worried and very concerned,” she said. Of SmartMeter technology, Gilbert pointed out, “The biggest threat is the sharing of information.”

Wheeler said CU’s only information from the new meters will be the number of kilowatt-hours used per month and at which hour of the day and night they were used.

Tea Party members, including Harwood, said one of their concerns is the future — that today’s SmartMeter technology can lead to future advances.

“That’s why we’re here today,” Harwood said. “We see things happening in stages. And one stage leads to another.”

Harwood said hackers are also a concern in this kind of technology.

The SmartMeters being installed by CU do not have the capacity to reach beyond the meter and they cannot be retrofitted to accommodate future technologies, Wheeler said. If CU decided to move on to more advanced technology, new meters would have to be purchased, he noted. Plus, if such modern advances were implemented by the local utility, CU likely would make them voluntary in a fashion similar to the utility’s Cycle & Save Program from the 1970s and 1980s in which customers were compensated for their voluntary inclusion in an energy curtailment program, Wheeler explained.

“I appreciate your concerns about where this is going,” Wheeler acknowledged. “I’ve seen the ads on TV ... that Big Brother is right around the corner. But this is Cleveland Utilities. I can’t speak for Pacific Gas & Electric and I can’t speak for anybody else around us except for Cleveland Utilities. We are putting in these meters for two reasons.”

One of those reasons — saving costs on reading meters — could cut CU’s expenses considerably. Wheeler said the utility spends \$800,000 to \$900,000 each year on meter reading.

Turpin described CU’s rollout of the SmartMeters as “sneaky.”

“The point is we as customers of Cleveland Utilities object,” she stressed. “We do not want these meters. There has been no study. This has been such a fast

rollout ... you are not providing customers with any information.”

She claimed that the health risk with SmartMeters is their use of RF (radio frequency) waves. However, CU Information Technology Manager Walt Vineyard said the SmartMeter used by the local company transmits information only 1.6 seconds every four hours.

Cleveland Mayor Tom Rowland, a CU board member, said technology can be life-saving. He used himself as an example and the vehicular crash in which he was involved in May. The mayor credited technology with perhaps saving his life.

Turpin countered by asking, “When is it too much? Water is good for you but if you drink too much water it can kill you.”

Wheeler repeated that he in good faith cannot recommend an opt-out plan from the SmartMeter because Cleveland Utilities is under contract with TVA to implement its rate schedule.

Turpin charged Wheeler and the board with dismissing the SmartMeter issue and called it “naive.”

“I don’t think we have tried to dismiss it,” Wheeler replied. “I’ll take great issue with that statement. We have not tried to dismiss it.”

He added, “We go to the paper (Cleveland Daily Banner) and we explain what we are doing ... that’s not dismissing it.”

The debate ended a few minutes later when Board Chairman Dale Hughes adjourned the meeting.

A detailed description of the SmartMeter test phase being implemented by Cleveland Utilities was published in Wednesday’s edition of the Cleveland Daily Banner. It included interviews with Wheeler, Vineyard and Bart Borden, manager of operations in CU’s Electric Division. It also quoted information taken from an anti-SmartMeter flier being circulated in Cleveland and Bradley County by the local Tea Party.

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