

The Cleburne News  
CleburneNews.com  
Sunday, Feb. 7, 2010

## Residents question safety of "smart" electric meters

by Wayne Ruple  
Cleburne News Editor

Did installation of an Alabama Power "smart" meter lead to a fire resulting in the destruction of a local Heflin businessman's home? That question was one among many raised by over 60 irate Cleburne County residents at a meeting this week with a representative of the Alabama Public Service Commission.

"They're (AP) not giving us any answers, just excuses," said one meeting attendee.

PSC Representative Bernard Givan told the crowd that he is a strong advocate of the new meters which enable AP to get readings in their offices and also enable customers to know more about their power usage.

"They are supposed to be a big plus for everyone," he said while pointing out that electric power suppliers across the nation are switching to them. "Millions are being installed nationwide," he added.

Asked if he had heard of any problems, Givan said he understands there have been a lot in Bakersville, California. Cleburne County Revenue Commissioner Joyce Fuller said she understands the company which makes the meters is involved in a large lawsuit in Hawaii over faulty water meters they manufactured.

Givan admitted, "There is a lot we don't know yet. It is very early in the game and I will be meeting with Alabama Power Friday. The company is not volunteering any information and I have a lot of questions. Givan said the meters are supposed to be certified by the manufacturer but many in the meeting questioned their safety and asked what they should do.

High bills, some over \$700, coupled with power outs, appliance burn-outs, and fire questions were raised.

Jan Kilgore said their meter was installed the first of December but it was replaced five days before their double-wide burned to the ground because, according to the installer, it had sent an "alarm" that something was wrong. She said the meter was located on the end of the home where the fire started.

The Kilgores had seen their bill increase by \$150.

Several residents complained of high bills. Givan said consumers should expect higher bills in cold weather but some of the increases gave him concern, especially increased rates at unoccupied dwellings. He said he does not know if the meters have some sort of "an alarm" built

in them. One resident said they had two meters. One building had no electrical heat usage put posted a 50 percent increase in kilowatts used while the second metered location, in use more showed "almost" a 50 percent increase.

He said AP told him that the old meters didn't register usage correctly and that the higher bills reflected what should have been charged all along.

Local consumer advocate Justin Nolen said his family had lowered their thermostat setting and saw their bills jump \$120 - \$220 more per month.

Cleburne County Jailer Lane Kilgore cited an example of one employee whose bill went from \$120 — \$400 per month and he uses gas heat. Several spoke saying AP told them the reason their bills increased was due to their water heaters being located on an exterior wall of the home.

"I draw my water from a well, it is already very cold. I know where my water heater is really located," said one of the speakers. "I have always had five in the family and my power bill was \$236 more."

Fuller said her bill is \$716, a \$300 increase over last year at the same time.

One lady said she had an unoccupied building and the bill doubled.

She said she was first told by AP that the weather caused the increase but when she continued to tell them no one lived at the residence the reread the meter, gave her credit and claimed it had been misread.

Another said they used lights only at a metered location and their kilowatt usage doubled. Some said AP recommended they go on budget billing until the problems are sorted out. "But," said one, "we would be stuck with the higher billing per month."

One resident, who owns a business, said his residence bill doubled but his business, which uses a lot of 220 voltage, maintained the same rate.

One man said he purchased all new energy efficient appliances and switched to energy saving lights and his usage/bills went up.

"Alabama Power is using the excuse of cold weather but we didn't have that much in December. What will it be when we get our bills for this and the coming months?" asked one lady.

Givan asked everyone present to leave their names, account numbers if they had them and a contact number because he intends to meet with AP and pull the accounts so that the PSC can study them.

He advised consumers to pay their bills and if they are having financial problems to contact the PSC's consumer services department.

Givan's said consumers should receive credits if the meters are found to be faulty.

He said that after seeing the very large number of complaints lodged on a Facebook website and hearing from Nolen the PSC decided something is happening in Cleburne County. "With this number of problems something is different," he said.

One lady said her unoccupied parent's home which normally had a bill of \$43 per month jumped to \$344. "The house has a heat pump but it was set around 62 degrees. On the other hand our home, with a house full of kids and washers and dryers going only had a bill of \$93," she added.

One resident said the day after his "smart" meter was installed the breaker box overheated and almost started a house fire. He said no one was home for two weeks while he was installing a new box and during that time he only had a refrigerator and freezer operating. He saw a \$140 increase in his bill.

The man said AP had a second "smart" meter installed after having told him the house could have burned. "I heard there have been several houses burned in Georgia because of these meters," added another man.

Walter Thrower said he was told to replace wires in his home or "the house could burn." Freedom Baptist Church Pastor Dr. Darryl Jones told Givan that "there are hundreds affected by this in Cleburne County. This is big. This is huge. I am a minister and I see many folks on fixed incomes. How are they going to pay these bills?"

"Well, we saw it on Facebook and decided this is something we can not blow off. If they (Alabama Power) ignore this, they can turn this opportunity for good public relations or they can turn it into a 180 degree serious problem. They need to get someone who is responsive. I've heard some horror stories about Alabama Power. The company has to do some better training."

One lady said her meter is right outside her bedroom and she is concerned about the "drumming noise" it makes. "I'm afraid to go home," she said.

Alan Ward said he has had appliance circuits burned out since installation of the new "smart" meter.

A builder of high-rises, Steven Davis, told the crowd that the electric line into the home carries 440 volts which is knocked down to 220 at the meter and inside the junction box it is separated into 110 for outlets and most small appliances. Electric stoves and dryers usually use 220. He explained that if the "smart" meter is faulty and is allowing more than 220 into the home then that could cause the reports of overheating, appliance burnouts, light bulbs blowing every few days, electronics being burned out, ground fault interrupters tripping and other electrical problems reported during the meeting.

He said newer wiring in newer homes can withstand some high voltage spikes but sooner or later there may be problems.

Cleburne County residents having any type of electrical problems or abnormal electric bills should contact Givan via email at: [Bernard.Givan@psc.alabama.gov](mailto:Bernard.Givan@psc.alabama.gov).

You may also file online complaints at: [www.psc.state.al.us](http://www.psc.state.al.us)  
Or, call toll free 1-800-392-8050.