



THE PLAIN DEALER

HOME HEATING

Groups fight rate hikes to cover gas heat for poor

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Two neighborhood groups are opposing Dominion East Ohio Gas Co.'s plan to increase rates that pay for a program to help low income families.

"We don't see any basis, any reason to force customers to pay this, especially when rates are climbing," said Joseph Meissner, a Legal Aid lawyer representing Consumers for Fair Utility Rates and the Neighborhood Environmental Coalition.

The groups want the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio to throw out Dominion's rate increase request.

Dominion said it is carrying a \$76 million shortfall in a state-created program that allows qualifying low-income families to pay 10 percent of their monthly incomes instead of the actual cost of the gas. Dominion makes up the difference with money raised from all its customers.

The company has asked the PUCO to increase what all customers, residential and business, pay for the program from 11 cents per 1,000 cubic feet of gas to 84 cents. Dominion customers pay about \$13 per 1,000 cubic feet of gas, including all charges except taxes.

That's the largest increase in the 22-year history of the Percentage of Income Payment Plan.

Because of soaring gas costs, more than 84,000 families, among 1.2 million residential customers, had enrolled in PIPP by the end of September.

An increase in the charge would likely push even more families into the program, said Tim Walters, a community organizer who's also on the staff of Consumers for Fair Utility Rates.

Dominion, in its PUCO filing, said that about half the 84-cent charge would be used to pay off the existing debt, on which the company has already had to pay \$1.8 million in interest charges.

The rest would go toward what Dominion expects to need in the coming year.

That's the problem, said Meissner. "There's no legal basis for half of what they want. It's not even good accounting."

As for the existing shortfall, he said, "They should have foreseen it. They could have taken that amount and tried to stretch out [the payments] so it doesn't impact customers at one time. This seems like a bit of vengeance."

Both Meissner and Walters think the utility ought to seek help from a state fund that helps low-income people.

Columbia Gas of Ohio has also filed a request to increase what its customers pay. Columbia measures its

gas per 100 cubic feet, rather than 1,000 as Dominion does. Columbia's request is to increase the current 0.8 cent-per-100 cubic feet fee to almost 6.5 cents. No one has objected so far.

Columbia had nearly 61,000 families enrolled in PIPP by the end of September and had rung up a shortfall of \$71.7 million.

The Ohio Consumers' Counsel is examining both applications but has not decided whether to intervene. "Any time you see an increase like this, our office is concerned," said spokeswoman Maureen Miller.

Both increases will go into effect automatically on Jan. 6 unless the agency decides it needs more information, including hearings, said PUCO spokeswoman Shana Eiselstein

PUCO Chairman Alan Schriber said he is waiting for his staff to complete an analysis.

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