



News 4 Investigates: Automated gas meters

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Steve Chamraz, News Chief Investigative Reporter

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Lake St. Louis (KMOV) -- Laclede Gas is currently installing hundreds of thousands of new automated gas meters in the St. Louis area. The meters transmit readings electronically, with no need for meter readers or estimating. But several residents on one street say they've been told there are problems with the meters that might be affecting their bills.



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News 4 Chief Investigative Reporter, Steve Chamraz, looks into the problem.

Gas bills are higher this winter, and many consumers are wondering if those higher bills are correct.

Residents on one St. Charles County street are questioning more than just their bill.

Robert and Joyce Powell watch their thermostat closely.

"We have it on 68 during the day, then down to 65 when we're sleeping," they say.

They are trying to keep their gas bill low, but they are also trying to stay warm. When they received their bill for December, they were warm alright.

"I had to sit my wife down and give my wife a little time out because she just about went through the roof," says Robert Powell.

Here is why.

The November bill was \$226.25 and the December bill was \$820.40; a difference of \$523.



"We realized we could not have used that much gas. I mean, McDonnell Douglas doesn't use that much gas manufacturing F-15 aircrafts," says Powell.

Bob is not alone.

Laura Aujer is Bob's neighbor.

"It was \$159.14 and now its \$489.87. A 300% increase in 1 month which can't possibly be right," she says.

But wait, there is more. Meet Marilyn Miller.

"Current charges were \$307 and they went to \$867," says Miller.

On this one cal-de-sac in Lake St. Louis, three out five homeowners had huge increases in their December bills. Naturally they had questions.

"Then I called the gas company and the first thing she said to me was, 'Well ma'am, you know the rates have gone up,'" says Miller.

That's true. Due in part to Hurricane Katrina, wholesale gas prices shot up 40 percent this winter.

"So naturally, everyone thinks I had a big increase in my bill and it was due to higher costs," says Bob Powell.

But residents here think there could be another reason.

This neighborhood has automated meter readers, or AMR's. What they do is send your gas reading to Laclede Gas by radio. No more estimating, no more meter readers and they're coming to every home in the metro area.

"We've done most of St. Charles County and right now about 210,000 of the automatic meter reading devices have been installed," says Laclede Gas spokesman George Csolak.

Csolak says the automated meters are used all over the country and are virtually fool proof.

"The reliability is higher than 99 percent, it's more than 99percent," says Csolak.

That is not what the folks on Park Hill Circle are being told.

"The representative came out and he showed me that the meter was incorrectly read," says Marilyn Miller.

"They did indicate there were some problems with the automated transmitter style meter, which is what we had," said Laura Aujer.

"This morning they had the gall to tell me they're having a 1-in-10 error rate, a 10% error rate on these electronic meters," says Bob Powell.

In fact, a Laclede technician actually removed Powell's meter. But a 10 percent error rate, could that be right?

"I haven't heard the 1-in-10. I haven't heard that rate," says Csolak.

Automated Gas Meters

What is your take on having an automated gas meter?

I think they are a great idea

I will watch my bill much closer

I hate the idea

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"I have heard of some isolated cases where there have been some issues with some of the reads and maybe some programming issues."

There are questions about the AMR technology.

"I don't know if these transmitters are shielded from sunspots, or cell phone activity of why they're in error, but there's a very high rate of error, just in this neighborhood alone," says Powell.

Csolak says none of that is a concern. The AMRs transmit readings every 15 minutes, so even if there is a temporary interruption, the following readings should be correct.

"Anytime you have something of this magnitude, a total change over, you're going to have glitches here and there," says Csolak.

But there is another problem. Laclede Gas says it is the customer's responsibility to check for problems with your bill. That does not sit well on Park Hill Circle.

"I was quite dismayed when she told me they know they have a problem and its up to the customer to figure it out," says Powell.

"That's unfortunate if they're just sitting there waiting for people to make a phone call themselves and them not taking a pro-active stance and taking care of the problem," says Aujer.

Csolak says Laclede Gas is trying to be responsive.

"When a new system like this is being deployed there will be some issues, and we try to be responsive and take care of them right away," he says.

"The key thing is once the system is installed and people start getting reads, and it starts becoming a normal thing the accuracy rate is more than 99 percent.

Laclede is checking into the complaints of the homeowners on Park Hill Circle to see if the meters are working correctly.

In the meantime, "You have to be careful and not take everything for face value and not think that they're right," says Marilyn Miller.

And that's the bottom line; it is up to you to check your bill. And it is not just the price but the meter reading as well.

Csolak has three important pieces of advice;

1. Always compare year to year
2. Learn how to read your bill. Customer relations at Laclede Gas will help you do that.
3. If you think you have a problem, Call Laclede Gas and they will look into it.

Laclede Gas Web site

KMOV.com user comments

February 3, 2006 10:45 a.m.

The kids sleep in heavy pj's the temp is never over 65 at night and 60 days...so why a \$300.00 bill!

February 2, 2006 06:06 p.m.

I HOPE IT WILL NOT STEAL US FROM LIVING, LOOK LIKE THAT, WHAT THEY TO KILL OLDER

PEOPLE OUT AS HARD AS WE HAVE WORKED TO MAKE THIS COUNTRY'

February 2, 2006 10:59 a.m.

I honestly don't believe the meters are accurate. I believe Laclede Gas was and is fully aware of the problem, as the erros are "always" in their financial favor. Interesting that gas prices are very high, passed on to the consumer, but did you see the profit Exxon made?

February 2, 2006 06:31 a.m.

I do not like the idea of these cellnet meters I have talked to a representative of Ameran U.E. and he told me that they had employees working six days a week because the meters were not working properly.

February 1, 2006 07:46 p.m.

I read the articles in the Labor Tribune so now I really understand what this is all about. . . Laclede's greed! When you stop gas workers from coming into your home to read meters, you stop the safety checks they do all the time, and I appreciate that service. The articles had a lot of examples from real people about how the gas workers saved their lives by finding leaks they didn't know existed. Laclede has to get back to being a public service concerned with our safety instead of just another profit making company. After all, where can we go as an alternative? They have a responsiblity to us, the public. Time was when they were one of the most respected companies in St. Louis. No more!

February 1, 2006 07:43 p.m.

I BELEIVE THAT THESE NEW METERS ARE NOT VERY ACCURATE AND PEOPLE ARE GOING TO HAVE ALOT OF PROBLEMS WITH THEM.

Share your thoughts on automated gas meters

Online at:

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