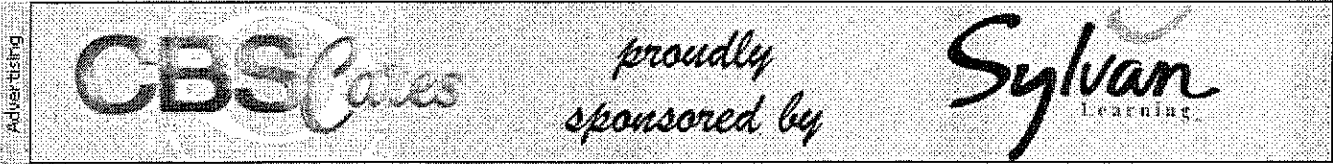


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News 4 Investigates: Automated gas meters

04:25 PM CST on Friday, January 27, 2006

Steve Chamraz, News Chief Investigative Reporter

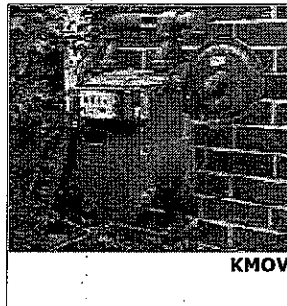
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Lake St. Louis (KMOV) -- Laclede Gas is currently installing hundreds of thousands of new automated gas meters in the St. Louis area. The meters transmit readings electronically, with no need for meter readers or estimating. But several residents on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

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.



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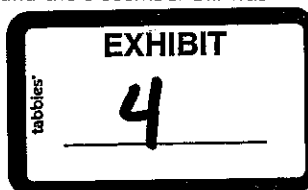


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"We realized we could not have used that much gas. I mean, McDonnell Douglas doesn't use that much gas manufacturing F-15 aircrafts," says Powell.

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.

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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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.

"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 it's 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

January 30, 2006 11:53 p.m.

Laclede isnt telling you everything. The electric meters are powered by electric. The new gas meters are powered by a lithium battery that they say will last ten years. Not likely. As the battery weakens so will your accuracy. The devices being installed on older meters can and do leak after installation. The cellnet employees have also caused leaks on other areas of your service when installing the device. Funny, they forgot to tell you that. I know because Im one of the techs that have to go behind these guys and repair the leaks they leave behind. They dont tell you by eliminating the human factor you will lose a valuable safety net. The meter reader wears a leak detection device that senses a small leak while they are in your home or business. This device also works outside. If your meter is in an enclosed area, and you dont enter that area regularly, a small leak that goes unchecked could be explosive. Once the system is in place the gas will not be turned off when a home or business changes hands. Laclede simply stops charging one consumer and begins charging the next. A person could remove a stove or dryer and leave a leak for the next customer. Again, an explosive possibility. I urge you to contact the Missouri Public Service Commission with your concerns. They may listen, but remember they are allowed to work for the same utilities they oversee at the end of their term. I would also urge you to be very aware of the odor of gas after the cellnet employee has worked on your meter. They are not trained technicians and cannot identify and locate leaks. They create them and leave it up to you to make the call. Unfortunately, its not a matter of "if," but "when" will someone be hurt or killed due to this new "technology". Just because Cellnet and Laclede tell you their product is accurate doesnt mean its true.

January 30, 2006 07:09 p.m.

when the company installs their device on laclede's meters they are leaving numerous leaks that are potentially dangerous. Laclede is trying to eliminate manpower but that manpower is already figured into the rate and they don't want to lower the rates to compensate the consumer for lower service.

January 30, 2006 05:21 p.m.

I feel in the long run it will be beneficial to the customer and the company. Initially there will be some "bumps" in the road like any new process, but I am sure they will be worked out

January 30, 2006 02:19 p.m.

1. At the Laclede Gas Web site, can you find any instructions on how to read a gas meter?
2. At the Laclede Gas Web site, can you find any instructions on how to interpret a gas bill?
3. If you don't complain about your bill, they can keep any overcharges you pay and not worry about it.
4. If you don't keep your copies of Laclede Gas bills, how will you ever prove that you were overcharged?
5. If you are not going to have meter readers coming to your home or business anymore, you must be sure and check for gas leaks near the meter. The readers used to do that.
6. If you learn that Laclede Gas has received permission to raise rates 30 percent and your gas bill jumps from \$100 in one billing period to \$350 in the next, doesn't that strike you as being more than 30 percent?

January 28, 2006 11:43 p.m.

I am very conservative, and from march to November I used only \$185.00.
And the very next month was \$125.00. That's for just one month.
That cant be right!
I use more electric than gas and my bill is under \$20.00per month.

January 28, 2006 07:21 p.m.

I think the automated meter reading is a great idea. There is no interruption in service when being installed. It is very safe and will give accurate readings daily. Customers that typically are not home don't have to worry about getting estimated bills any more. L.G. still has to get in customers houses once every three years to do gas safe inspections and the services are always available for customers to call and inquire about billing and or gas orders. I feel that every project has it's ups and downs and once the bugs are ironed out the system will run very smooth, just like the millions of other customers in this country that have the same automated meter reader system.

Share your thoughts on automated gas meters

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