

Deregulation: Not the Only Reason for Skyrocketing Home Heating Costs

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Deregulation: does less government control sound good? Not to some Michigan residents who blame decreasing governmental control of gas pricing for their skyrocketing home-heating bills.

Despite December's mild temperatures and the recent government deregulation that promised more competitive gas prices, many DTE Energy customers found themselves wishing for pre-deregulation prices.

A 90-year-old Alpena resident said she nearly fainted when she opened her January gas bill. The charges had increased 145 percent from the previous month.

She was so upset that she had to ask a friend to contact DTE Energy, Michigan Consolidated Gas Company's (MichCon) "parent" company, to question the bill. At that time, a representative for DTE Energy explained that the government was no longer regulating the gas charges and went on to say that prices would continue to rise as much as 30 percent.

However, DTE Energy more recently announced that deregulation is not the only reason for January's shocking residential

heating bills. When a recent survey of thirty local families showed that the average residential heating bill increased by 181 percent during the months of December and January, consumers began asking why.

In a letter DTE Energy sent to its customers February 5th, deregulation was not cited as the problem. On the contrary, in that letter DTE Energy took full responsibility for the excessive gas bills.

According to Robert Sitkuskas, DTE Energy customer billing director, the increase was the "result of a computer problem experienced during a conversion to a new billing system to serve both MichCon and Detroit Edison customers."

DTE Energy also sent out a pamphlet detailing Gas Choice, a new program that came into effect as a result of deregulation. Gas Choice, a Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) approved plan, allows consumers the option to choose the company they want to supply their natural gas.

According to a representative of Presque Isle Electric and Gas Co-op, a MPSC approved company, the Gas Choice program is like having the option of

which long distance phone carrier to use.

Gas consumers can now make the switch to one of the MPSC approved suppliers in search of a more competitive rate.

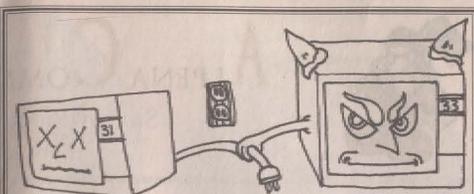
MichCon, now a subsidiary of DTE Energy, will continue to provide primary customer services such as gas delivery, meter reading, billing and emergency response. If a customer chooses to select a new gas supplier, that company will provide and charge only for the gas.

To make deregulation work for instead of against them, consumers must act fast by contacting a MPSC approved company. Gas Choice is based on the first-come, first-serve principle; open in 2002 to 440,000 customers.

The Gas Choice Program allows natural gas customers to currently select from the following MPSC approved companies:

Bishop Energy Services LLC (877) 234-1410
service@bishopenery.com
Interstate Gas Supply Inc (877) 444-7437
choice@igsenergy.com

Presque Isle Electric & Gas Co-op (800) 423-6634 service@pieg.com
MichCon Gas Co (800) 477-4774
www.dteenergy.com



FOX 33 PULLS PLUG ON CHANNEL 31

PHIL WENZEL
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Alpena county TV viewers will no longer be able to watch the Fox network simply by using an antenna and tuning to channel 31.

Fox 33, the Cadillac Fox affiliate which operated a low-power transmitter in Alpena county, has turned it off. The signal, which was a duplication of channel 33 in Cadillac, is off the air for good.

"At this time Fox 33 has no plans to turn channel 31 back on," the station said in a press release on January 15. The expense of keeping the signal on the air forced its termination, the release went on to say.

Another reason for the shut down had to do with territory. Fox 33 programming director Julia Horchner pointed out that Alpena is out of the station's market area, which is Traverse City.

"By operating our station in Alpena, we may've been infringing on another TV station's area," she said.

Several phone calls were made to Fox 33's studios concerning the channel's status. One of them was from WAIT morning host Steve Wright, who wanted to let his listeners know what had happened.

He was told that if 500 people would call and complain channel 31 might be saved. Wright gave the information over the air, but not enough calls were made.

The signal's transmitter was located on Manning Hill, just west of Alpena. According to Horchner, it was a very low-power signal. She added that most of the calls they received after it was turned off were placed from the Manning Hill area.

Horchner apologized for the situation, saying "We realize that is frustrating to viewers, but it is important for a small business to remain fis-

cally responsible...this was a very difficult decision for our management to make."

There are several other ways to watch Fox for people who used to view it on channel 31.

Some viewers in Alpena County may be able to receive Fox 33 on three of its other channels. Channel 33 is near Cadillac, channel 54 is near Traverse City, and channel 45 is near Vanderbilt. Horchner mentioned that channel 45 was recently given a power boost.

Viewers who cannot receive these signals can still watch Fox on local cable. Those with satellite dishes can call 800-863-9090 for waiver information.

The acquisition of a waiver would allow a satellite viewer to receive the Fox affiliates from New York and Los Angeles from their satellite provider.

ACC Enrollment, Full-Time Students Increasing

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Despite the slowing economy in the Alpena area, enrollment and the number of full-time students at ACC are increasing.

Max Lindsay, Dean of Students at ACC, reported a 6.8 percent enrollment

increase this semester, bringing the total number of students to 2,253.

The rise is the first big one in years according to Lindsay; the last big change being the year the Wurtsmith Airforce Base in Oscoda closed.

The recent increase also has to do with businesses

closing. Many former Fletcher Paper Company employees are going to school, as well as other workers who are enrolled in state-funded educational training programs.

Not only is the enrollment increasing, but the number of full-time students at ACC. This semester, there

are 872 full-time students compared to 722 last semester. The average number of credits taken by full-time students has stayed the same at 14.25 hours.

The economy could play a big part on whether or not this growing trend will continue. Lindsay said that ACC enrollment seems to

coincide with the economy. When the economy's up, enrollment is down and vice-versa.

To help the increased trend of enrollment, ACC has prioritized enrollment management. They will be making brochures for the first time and will also be holding focus

groups that rate the relevancy of materials given to students. The ACC Web site, Lindsay said, which was started last year, also has been a valuable asset to students looking for a community college to attend.

The web site allows students to discover the Alpena area as well as ACC.

ACC Prepares for Possible Cut in 2002 State Funding

JESSICA THIEM
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As of today Richard Sutherland, vice president for administration and finance, is not sure what Michigan's state funding has in store for ACC in the fall of 2002. There has been talk of a substantial cut in state funds, but it is not certain.

Sutherland said that John Engler, Governor of Michigan, has said that he would like to keep the funding around the same amount as last year, but all of Michigan's State figures are not in yet.

According to the Detroit Free Press, Governor Engler has stated that Michigan colleges will receive similar amounts in the 2002-2003 school year to what they received in the 2001-2002 school year. However, it could be July before anything is certain, stated Sutherland.

"When over 50 percent of your funding comes from the state, it's a little tough to make definitive decisions [about the budget] at this time," remarked Sutherland.

He also said that ACC is in pretty good

financial shape right now because of increased enrollment. However, a dramatic decrease in state funding could really hurt the college financially, making ACC use a good portion of the excess funds from this year's enrollment increase.

One consequence of the state cutting funds would inevitably be a raise in tuition. One college for example, Central Michigan University, will have an increase of 28 percent this coming fall.

Tuition at ACC has risen 1 percent in the past few years. In the fall of 2002, there could be a slightly higher

raise of hopefully no more than 5 percent, said Sutherland.

However, if legislators were to dramatically drop their funding, the tuition increase could be almost 12-13 percent. Governor Engler promises to keep tuition increases under 8.5 percent at the community college level.

Sutherland said that when trying to make up for a cut in state funding, he has to keep in mind student services. He does not want to take away any services that are already provided to

the students. When formulating a budget he always keeps the welfare of the students in mind.

Because Sutherland is not yet sure what the state is going to do, all he can do is

formulate several game-plans for the fall of 2002 and hope that legislators don't cut ACC's funding too much. Uncertainties about ACC's state funding will be cleared up later this year.

