

# Indecision may force hydro hike

Consumers may pay as much as \$5 more with smart meters

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Indecision by Ontario's energy regulator shouldn't mean higher bills for hydro users, Newmarket Hydro president Paul Ferguson says.

Newmarket will roll out a pilot project this summer for so-called "smart meters" with the Ontario Liberals' plan to equip every home in the province with the high-tech meters set to begin in two years.

The idea is to take one meter reading about every hour, rather

than two readings a day and make the data available to home and small business owners to realize savings during off-peak demand periods for hydro.

Initially settling on meters that could send information from the utility to the customer's home or business, referred to as one-way communication, the Ontario Energy Board changed its mind last month.

Now, the board has advocated two-way communication, where information flows from the meter to the utility and from the utility back to the customer.

Newmarket is the only municipality in Canada set to use two-way smart meters as part of this summer's pilot project, Mr. Ferguson

said.

But the province's wavering could mean 50 per cent fewer suppliers if the Ministry of Energy approves two-way meters.

The result could mean higher than expected cost landing on energy consumers' bills, he said.

The average household can expect to see a \$3 to \$5 price spike a month as a direct result of implementing smart meters, according to the province.

Mr. Ferguson hopes to cut that in half, with Newmarket ratepayers dishing out as little as an additional \$1.50 a month once the technology comes on stream in 2007.

"If you don't set out to achieve that, you won't," Mr. Ferguson

said, adding implementing smart meters will be as complex as opening the market several years ago.

Meanwhile, residents will be able to check their power consumption via telephone, Internet or an in-home display in order to capitalize on less expensive off-peak rates.

Smart meters are not a new technology, Mr. Ferguson said.

During the 1980s, pilot projects began cropping up using time-of-use meters.

Mr. Ferguson knew then, amid years of government-controlled under-priced electricity, smart meters would become widespread in the future as the price and demand for hydro swelled in Ontario.

Meanwhile, the latest pricing proposal from the energy board may mean homeowners pay more to cool their homes during the summer months.

Consumers are paying 4.7 cents per kilowatt hour for the first 750 hours a month and 5.5 cents for any amount beyond that.

Under the proposed pricing system, hydro customers would pay the lowest rates on weekends and holidays.

Hydro rates would peak week-day summer afternoons and the morning and evening in the winter.

The Energy Ministry is expected to devise a new electricity pricing system by April 1.

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