

Our Readers Opinions...

Gas deregulation options quagmire for customers

To the Editor:

Having become sick of the various pitches delivered on my doorstep by marketers in the wake of gas supply deregulation, I decided to try and make some sense of the confusion. Should I sign or stay with the regulated utility?

Let's look at the players in our area. Enbridge is the name at the top of your gas bill if you are still a direct customer. Look further down and you will find this is, in fact, Enbridge Gas Distribution, which is the supply utility operating the pipelines and delivering gas to homes and businesses.

Amongst the gas marketers are Direct Energy Marketing, Ontario Energy Savings Corp., Ontario Hydro Energy Natural Gas, Superior Energy Management and Enbridge Home Services. It's interesting to note that Enbridge Home Services is a distinct and separate gas marketer, with no common ownership to Enbridge Gas Distribution. Be absolutely sure who you are dealing with here, as the question "Are you representing Enbridge?"

can be answered truthfully by representatives of both companies, even though one is the supply utility and the other is a gas marketer. One wonders why this situation exists, given the obvious possibility for confusion.

The last player is the Ontario Energy Board, who approves the quarterly rate adjustments for Enbridge Gas Distribution and will take note of any complaints or questions regarding the sale and marketing of natural gas.

Next we must look at the actual bill: The gas delivery component and customer charge are common to all billing options. As for the gas supply charge, on the Enbridge Gas Distribution bill this is the cost per unit (cubic metre) of gas consumed. This rate is adjusted quarterly and reflects the market price for gas. It may also be modified downwards by a factor reflecting how much gas is purchased by Enbridge Gas Distribution and is in storage. On a bill from a gas marketer, it will reflect the fixed price contracted for at sign up.

Looking at my current bill, I see that the gas supply charge is 51.7 percent of the total bill, and people should be aware that if they choose either fixed or market price for their gas purchases, the amount that can be fixed or variable will always only be a percentage of the total bill.

What I object to is the sales approach that has been used on my doorstep, which usually goes something like this: "Hi, I'm from XYZ, here to check that you are signed up for gas price protection. May I see a copy of your current bill?"

If your bill shows you have signed a fixed price contract, that's the end of the interview. If not, the approach continues with various horror stories about what will happen if you don't sign up for price protection. While fixed price is certainly a component of what they are offering, the fact is they are trying to sell a multi-year fixed price contract to supply and bill the variable portion of your gas bill.

In one sales pitch I was told the Kyoto Accord will put the cost of gas through

the roof, and that if terrorists blow up our gas lines, those who didn't have a fixed price contract would rue the day they failed to sign up. To me this was amusing, but I abhor this type of selling, which gives sales professionals a bad name. Imagine that kind of tactic being used on some of our seniors, who may be a tad confused by the double talk and innuendo.

The product offered by the gas marketers may be fine, you just need to have the correct information to make your decision. The facts are that current gas supply rates are around 20 cents per cubic metre and some predictions estimate the cost will edge up to around 26 cents by the end of the year. Those that signed fixed price contracts below 18 cents have done very well. Current offerings from gas marketers are between 24.9 and 28 cents per cubic metre, fixed from one to five years.

An excellent source of information for rates and forecasts is

www.energyshop.com
Dave Nicoll
Stouffville



Members of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Tourism Association at a networking evening last year at Willow Springs.

Tourism group hosts festival

Whitchurch-Stouffville Tourism Association is hosting a Maple Syrup Festival Wine and Cheese evening at Bruce's Mill on March 29, 7 to 10 p.m.

The event includes a guided tour of the sugar bush by lantern, a silent auction from 8:30 to 10 p.m., delicious snacks and an opportunity to sample wines from two local wineries: Willow Springs and Applewood. Costumed guides will provide information on local history, as well as the history of Bruce's Mill and the production of maple syrup throughout the last century.

Among the many items up for auction are two certificates for advertising space in *Stouffville This Month*. Tickets for the event are \$25 each and are available by calling the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority at 416-667-6299.

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