

## Energy Choice

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joining long-distance vendors and credit card companies to interrupt evening meals.

At this point a pilot program that started the first of the year has about half its goal of 2,100 participants. The program is supposed to reach customers who account for 5 percent of UGI's peak load, divided proportionally between commercial and residential accounts. The commercial side is 85 percent filled, but residential customers have so far been slow to commit.

While 14,000 customers initially expressed interest in the pilot, when that list was whittled down to 2,200 only 563 stayed in, most of them on the commercial side. UGI has since mailed participation forms to another 3,711 customers, mostly residential accounts, with a deadline of Jan. 16 for a response. Participation stood at 1,025 on Jan. 7. Participants in the pilot must choose an alternate power supplier, not UGI.

Debbie Vanderhoff of Idetown initially volunteered to be a pilot

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**Joe Rymar**  
Manager of Customer Relations, UGI

household, but she hasn't chosen an alternate electric supplier, and said she probably will stay with UGI. Two other BMBPA members said they also were in the program at first, but neither had chosen another supplier.

In Rymar's opinion, the program has gone too far, too fast. Legislation authorizing the pilot was signed in Dec., 1996, with a Jan. 1, 1998 start date. But some guidelines have been changed as the program has progressed, confusing even employees of the state Public Utility Commission (PUC) who are supposed to supervise it.

For example, the initial schedule called for 5 percent of customers to have choice this year, one-

third of customers in 1999, two-thirds in 2000 and everyone in 2001. But large industrial users complained that they would be at a disadvantage if they didn't have access to lower electric rates available to a competitor who had been chosen for the program. Now, the PUC is thinking about allowing 100 percent choice in 1999, but for only 10 percent of electricity use.

So, at this point, "We don't have any idea what will happen in '99," Rymar said.

Adding to the confusion, only three of 50 electricity suppliers licensed to do business in Pennsylvania are interested in picking up UGI's residential customers, although they are courting heavy business users. Rymar said most of the companies are focusing their attention on large industrial users and major cities, and they are free to pick and choose which customers they will solicit and accept.

## Energy choice may also bring confusion

**BACK MOUNTAIN** - Energy choice will let loose the forces of the free market in an area that has been tightly regulated for decades. It will also place an added burden on consumers who will have the power to select suppliers for electricity, but will have to wade through confusing forms and regulations to do so.

The savings could be substantial for large users of energy, such as industrial plants or offices, and they probably have the personnel in place to clearly analyze their options. It will take about the same amount of time and effort for a home owner or apartment renter to make the best choice, but he or she will have to squeeze the task around existing commitments.

The fundamental change is that the components of your electric bill, now bundled together in one charge, will be separated. That will allow you to choose a supplier, whose electricity will flow to your home through wires owned by the distributor, in this case UGI Utilities. Suppliers don't necessarily generate their own power, some are merely brokers of excess generation capacity anywhere in North America. Even UGI does not generate all its own power, it buys about half of it from Pennsylvania Power & Light, then resells it at cost.

Customers in the pilot program, which runs throughout 1998, will see a credit of 3¢ per

kilowatt hour on their UGI bill, and an 8 percent "participation credit," on the balance of their charge. Customers who choose to stay with UGI will not receive the 8 percent credit.

Rymar calls the 3¢ per KWH rate "the magic number," because if you can negotiate a rate below that, you'll save money. The participation credit is an added boost, but at this point is scheduled to expire at the end of 1998.

As with air fares and long-distance phone charges, your negotiation skills may make the difference between saving a little, a lot or nothing. Electricity suppliers are able to charge as much or as little as they choose, and each customer can be charged differently.

The assumption is that heavy users will be able to negotiate lower rates than light users.

The length of your commitment to a particular supplier may be negotiable, as well, so you could conceivably change suppliers monthly, and Rymar expects big users will do so, or at least threaten to switch in order to get a lower rate.

Unlike an existing utility, suppliers will not have rates restricted, so today's low rate could become tomorrow's high one. UGI, on the other hand, is required to keep its rates and transmission charges

stable until mid-2000, and its generation charge (the supply charge) the same for nine years. Rymar said UGI's rate is now about 3.5¢ per KWH. He said rates are generally low at this time because there is so much excess generating capacity available.

Even your billing will change, since you will choose to get separate bills for generation (supply) and transmission, or to have the charges combined on one bill. If you choose the latter, UGI's statement will clearly show the breakdown of charges, and will list the name and phone number of your supplier, in case you've forgotten them.

One point of confusion so far is that some suppliers were not prepared for the flood of inquiries about their services, and calls were met with busy signals. Also, since only three of the 50 suppliers licensed in Pennsylvania are interested in picking up UGI's residential customers, anyone calling the other 47 was wasting their time. That has happened as suppliers have run ads soliciting business in other areas, and Back Mountain people have seen them.

The UGI spokesman said some rules are still in flux, and others aren't understood even by people at the state Public Utility Commission (PUC). "It's changing almost daily," Rymar said.

By Ronald Bartizek

## Library news



Nancy Kozemchak

New books at the library: "The Angel of Darkness" by Caleb Carr is a story as told by the former street urchin whose rough life has given him wisdom beyond his years. Thus, New York City and

## Library lists new books

the alienist Dr. Kreizler himself are seen anew. A brilliant recreation of the past, high life and low.

"The Devil in Music" by Kate Ross takes place at a mist-shrouded villa on Lake Como, where an Italian nobleman is grooming a young English tenor for a career on the glittering operatic stage. Before their sojourn is over, one will die by violence and the other will disappear.

"Comanche Moon" by Larry McMurtry is a brilliant and haunting novel richly capable of standing on its own; a novel of the American West that began in 1985

with the winning masterpiece, Lonesome Dove. Texas Rangers, August McCrae and Woodrow Call are just beginning to deal with the perplexing tensions of adult life, when they enlist with a Ranger troop in pursuit of Buffalo Hump.

"Toward the End of Time" by John Updike tells of a 66 year old retired investment counselor, Ben Turnbull, living north of Boston in the year 2020. A recent war between the United States and China has thinned the population and brought social chaos. The dollar has been replaced by Massachusetts scrip.



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