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2008 OLYMPICS

Latest News

Judge: Ameren should get to charge more

BY MIKE RIOPELL, The Southern Springfield Bureau

Tuesday, August 12, 2008 7:17 PM CDT

SPRINGFIELD -- Many Ameren customers could face increases in their power and natural gas bills if a recommendation to the Illinois Commerce Commission holds up.

An administrative law judge ruled this week the Ameren utilities in Illinois should get a majority of the increases they asked for to pay for their electricity and natural gas systems.

If Ameren is allowed to collect more money, it would charge customers more for the delivery of energy. The actual cost of energy isn't affected by the case.

In the coming weeks, the Illinois Commerce Commission can accept the recommendation or change it. If it holds, AmerenIP customers likely would be hit with the sharpest increases to their natural gas and electricity bills.

AmerenCIPS customers would also be hit with rising costs, while AmerenCILCO customers actually could see a drop on part of their bills.

"It's got good news, it's got bad news," said David Kolata, director of the watchdog Citizens Utility Board.

What exactly the ruling means to an average bill payer hasn't yet been calculated by Ameren, but that should be done this week, said spokesman Sean Vanslyke.

"We need to take time and carefully examine and review it," Vanslyke said.

The company pushed for the increases to help its sagging credit rating and for infrastructure improvements.

But consumer groups argue the recommendation would mean too much more cash for the utility. In the ruling, would get Ameren to collect about \$163.5 million more – about 66 percent of what it originally asked for.

The company first requested \$247 million more, but reduced that number over the course of hearings in the case.

Kolata said his group figured the utility should get \$45 million at most.

Now, all sides get to make final arguments to the Illinois Commerce Commission, and a final decision will come by the end of September, said commission spokeswoman Beth Bosch.

Earlier, a similar judge suggested northern Illinois utility ComEd get 60 percent of what it asked for, which would mean a 3.7 percent increase on an average customer's electric bill. A final decision in that case could come this month.

Electric rates drew heavy attention from lawmakers and other officials last year because of sharp increases in power bills, particularly in central and southern Illinois.

"We are pleased that the amounts the companies requested were reduced, but still believe the increases are too high," said Natalie Bauer, spokesman for Attorney General Lisa Madigan.

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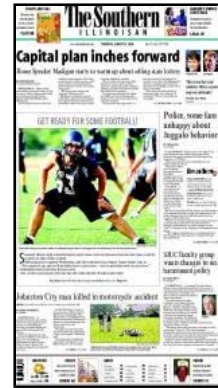
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