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Complaints heat up for Naperville-based Nicor

September 6, 2008 By [ROWENA VERGARA](#)
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A consumer watchdog group has received nearly 500 complaints about Nicor Gas bills this summer, and it's likely more are on the way.

According to Citizens Utility Board's Executive Director David Kolata, some customers are getting billed inaccurately because Nicor is not reading meters every two months as required by state law.

When meters are estimated instead of read, customers can up paying less than what they're consuming, Kolata said. Problems arise when the meters are read after months of being estimated. CUB claims that when the meter is finally read, customers get hit with extremely high bills because of the accumulation, and because Nicor charges all unpaid bills at the last month's rate.

Natural gas hit its record high of \$1.45 per therm in July. Nicor's price per therm is also up about 31 percent from this time last year.

Kolata said Nicor is also requiring that payment be made immediately on any "back-billed" services, which contrasts with state rules.

"Under law, if you haven't done an actual reading in four months, the company has to give a person four months to pay it off," he said. "You shouldn't have to pay it all in one month."

Customer wants answers

Leticia Sanchez, owner of Nancy's Boutique in downtown Aurora, is one of the customers confused with the billing process.

Sanchez was hit with a \$1,630 gas bill from Nicor at the end of July after she shut off the gas. Sanchez said she barely used gas in her bridal boutique this summer, preferring to wait until winter -- when it's really necessary -- to connect the gas.

But after Nicor conducted a reading in July, Nicor sent Sanchez a bill for all the gas she used -- but had yet to pay for -- because she was on a billing plan of \$99 a month. Sanchez remains confident she barely used the utility, especially not during the summer.

"I only use the gas when it's cold," she said. "I don't have a stove in here or anything. I would've understood if I used more, but I don't see it."

Special billing program starts Monday

At the same time, Nicor is awaiting word from the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC) on a proposed rate hike of \$4.60 per month to customers. Last April, the utility proposed a 5 percent annual increase to customers to maintain its infrastructure. The hike would bump up the delivery charge on the bill, and not the price of gas, Nicor said.

Still, Nicor said it would offer the lowest gas rates among utilities in Illinois, even if rates increased.

"There's been a rise in infrastructure and employee benefit costs, a rise in bad debt," said Nicor spokeswoman Annette Martinez said. "All of these things have caused us to increase rates."

On Thursday, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan filed written testimony urging the ICC to deny requests from Nicor, which she said would raise the company's revenues by \$140 million.

Regarding the CUB allegations, Martinez said Nicor is aware of the complaints, but says the company has followed all meter reading rules.

Nicor attributes the higher than usual customer complaints to billing changes, which are making customers more attentive, Martinez said.

Instead of receiving bills every two months during the summer, bills now arrive every month, Martinez said. It didn't help that July's gas prices were the highest seen, she said.

The company is offering some relief to customers who've had services disconnected because of non-payment.

Starting Monday, certain customers will be eligible to pay half of their outstanding balance, and pay the rest in installments over nine months. The program is only available until Sept. 19.

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News Group.

susan f wrote:

I am also having a big problem with Nicor gas. Like Leticia Sanchez I also received a \$1,500. gas bill for 4/23 to 6/23. They claim to have actual meter readings every other month. But even Dec. thru Feb. my bill was no where near that amount. Every time I talk to someone, they tell me it's my heavy pool heater usage. I have repeatedly told them my pool was not even opened until June 15 this year and my heater not hooked-up until one week later on June 22. (One day before the meter was read) When I say hook-up I don't mean turned on and running. I was on vacation for two weeks during the time in question and had my house heat turned off also. I have had my pool and heater for 8 years and know what it cost to run. To make a point, my entire gas bill for 2007 was 1,207. Also, this bill was dated 8/14/08. The reading was 6/23/08. If I had gotten the bill two months earlier I could've done something sooner. I had a large credit so I assumed that was why I didn't receive a bill. When I questioned it now, they said they didn't send the bill in June because the reading was so HIGH they thought it was a mistake and wanted to wait to read it again. They thought something had to be wrong. (Possibly a gas leak or something) And I still wasn't notified!!!! "No, we don't not notify you if something is wrong, we only

read the meter!!!!" Again, if I had simply gotten a statement I would have seen then for myself something was wrong. June thru August (when I actually did use my heater on occasion) seem ok. I received two bills in August due on 9/5 the other due 9/20. The first statement started off with a \$1,250. credit and now they want me to send in \$485. more. It's impossible talking to anyone there. They keep saying they same thing. "That's what the meter read and you are responsible for the gas usage and bill." If you know of anyone I could talk to or anyway to fight this I would be extremely grateful.

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