

The Capital

A Capital-Gazette Newspaper — Annapolis, MD

Published September 24, 2008

Home Heating Costs Increase this Winter

By ELISA SAUERS Staff Writer

Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. officials announced yesterday that the average natural gas customer will pay about \$110 more to keep their house warm this winter.

Between Nov. 1 and March 31, 2009, the five-month "heating season", ratepayers can expect a 16 percent increase from what they paid last year.

BGE officials attribute the increase to higher market prices for fuel on the horizon, according to a prepared statement released by the company yesterday.

In Anne Arundel County, approximately 88,600 residents are BGE natural gas customers.

BGE spokesman Kelly Shanefelter said whether market prices will come back down remains to be seen.

"We can't predict what the markets are going to do," Ms. Shanefelter said. "The estimated average residential gas costs are also based on other factors like usage and on how cold the weather is."

Commodity prices for fuel vary each month, she said.

Average BGE residential customers paid \$682 for gas last November through March, according to company figures. During that heating season, they likely consumed between 70 and 75 percent of their entire year's natural gas usage, company officials said, and spent about \$956 on their total gas for the year.

According to BGE's estimates, last year's \$682-heating season will look more like \$792 this year.

It's news that troubles Carol Baker, director of the county's Department of Aging, who sees firsthand how vulnerable the elderly community is to illness during harsh winters. And with most of them living on fixed incomes, they're in even greater jeopardy of struggling with rising energy costs, she said.

"I think this is going to be a tough winter for a lot of people, but particularly for seniors," Ms. Baker said. "We hear a lot of concerns now from elderly people saying, 'What are we going to do?' "

When elderly residents request aid, Ms. Baker's department coordinates utility assistance support through state grant programs offered through the Community Action Partnership, county programs like Senior Care and nonprofits such as Friends of Arundel Seniors Inc.

But most of the programs available through grant funds are one-time opportunities for assistance. As many ratepayers struggle month to month with energy turn-off threats, a subsidy for one month's utilities may just delay the inevitable turn-off crisis.

Harry Cole, the executive director at the Light House Shelter of Annapolis, said he could only imagine how the higher cost of this heating season will adversely affect the community. On the first Monday of every month, the shelter offers bill assistance to struggling ratepayers.

Lately, the first-Monday lines have grown significantly longer, Mr. Cole said, and the nonprofit's funds are being stretched to the maximum.

"The winter hasn't even hit yet," he said.

Ms. Shanefelter said BGE tries to minimize fluctuations in prices by purchasing about half of the company's winter fuel supply before heat season begins, but rates still fall subject to external market trends.

With numerous factors impacting energy bills in the approaching heating season, that leaves a heavy thought on many people's consciences.

"I really pray to God that we have a pretty mild winter ahead," Mr. Cole said.