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## Smart Meter Debate Intensifies At Resort Meeting; Delmarva Power Officials Defend Smart Meters

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A bank of smart meters is pictured affixed to an Ocean City condominium building this week. Photo by Shawn Soper

OCEAN CITY — Residents got a broad overview on several issues related to Delmarva Power's installation of smart meters in the resort and across the region during an at times testy meeting on Wednesday.

Delmarva Power last fall began installing smart meters at residences and business throughout Ocean City and across the Lower Shore. The smart meters are part of a larger initiative to upgrade the utility's electricity distribution system while allowing consumers to better manage energy use and streamline billing.

Almost from the beginning, however, the installation of smart meters has raised serious concerns in the community, from health worries over the potentially harmful effects of the radio frequency they transmit to security and privacy issues. Also at issue are the costs associated with the new meters and an opt-out provision for those who prefer to keep their traditional analog meters.

In an attempt to clear the air over some of the issues, the Ocean City AARP on Wednesday hosted an informational meeting at the Senior Center at 41<sup>st</sup> Street. During a meeting that was at times chippy and downright testy at others, Delmarva Power representatives and the Maryland Smart Meter Awareness (MSMA) organization presented their opposing views on a wide variety of issues in what essentially boiled down to a point-counter-point session.

MSMA President Jonathan Libber, a former attorney with the EPA, said the smart meter installation program was fraught with problems, from privacy and security issues to health concerns over microwave radio frequencies utilized by the technology to problems with increased fees and soaring monthly electric bills.

Libber, along with many in attendance on Wednesday, said Delmarva Power began installing the smart meters with little or no warning provided to consumers on the associated costs, the potential adverse health effects and the security and privacy issues.

The Maryland Public Service Commission late last month issued a directive providing an opt-out opportunity. There are no less than four bills circulating in the General Assembly on smart meters, although most have failed to make it out of their respective committees. Libber essentially called Delmarva Power a monopoly, but said consumers should have an opportunity to opt out of smart meter installation.

“If you have no choice in who provides energy to your home, you should have a choice if you want a smart meter or not,” he said.

Libber said the wireless smart meters are a threat to privacy and security for consumers, and while he didn't deny the intent for their installation, he said the information collected and distributed by the meters put consumers at risk if it fell into the wrong hands.

“These meters know if you're home or away, if you're asleep and what appliances you have,” he said. “Once the information is collected, it takes on a life of its own. It's wireless and almost impossible to protect.”

Libber said law enforcement officials are using the data in some parts of the country to track suspected criminals in what he characterized as warrantless searches. In California, the utility companies are selling the usage data to private entities, but there are protections currently under Maryland law.

“The utilities are very sincere that they want to protect your information,” he said. “We believe hacking is a very real possibility.”

However, Delmarva Power Senior Public Affairs Manager Jim Smith told those assembled smart meters provide obvious benefits to the consumer including fewer estimated bills, detailed energy use information, customer requested connects and disconnects, outage detections and the associated quick response to ensure power restoration. In addition, the remote readings the smart meters provide will reduce the number of trucks and employees on the road to perform tasks that would be done manually.

“Our utmost priority is to provide safe and reliable electricity to our customers,” he said. “Smart meters are a tool to help us do just that.”

Smith dismissed the notion wireless smart meters and the information they collect and share put consumers at risk on privacy and security issues.

“We are very stringent about customer privacy,” he said. “We are committed to ensure your privacy is protected.”

Libber also hammered home the issue of potential health risks associated with smart meters and the radio frequencies they use. He said the meters have been linked to health issues and have been found to cause problems with pacemakers, defibrillators and other medical equipment. Libber asserted Delmarva Power began installing the meters without proper testing and study.

“The industry says smart meters are safe,” he said. “Remember when the big tobacco companies told us cigarettes were safe. When I was with the EPA, we were often accused of using junk science to forward an agenda. This is not junk science, this is no science. There have been no independent studies on the impact of smart meters on human health.”

However, Smith pointed out there have been no health risks associated with smart meters and referred to third-party studies as proof.

“We haven't seen any adverse health effects,” he said. “There have numerous third-party studies done at the federal level and there is no indication of any health risks. The radio frequency is the same as baby monitors, remote control toys and even cell phones. The meters are really idle about 99 percent of the time.”

With an abundance of condominiums and other multi-family dwellings in Ocean City, banks of smart meters are being installed. One concerned citizen said his residence was in an 80-unit condo with a bank of smart meters in a utility room. He asked if it was safe for an individual to go into that utility room.

"They are well within any acceptable FCC range," said Delmarva Power's Jim Farrell. "I think you'd find it higher, but not as high as you'd think or were led to believe."

However, Libber countered multiple smart meters installed in a single location could have serious potential health implications, particularly for those who live closest to them.

"Multi-dwelling buildings with banks of these smart meters produce a tremendous amount of radiation," he said. "We have to be very careful with this stuff. If you live next to a bank of these meters, you could be in grave danger."

Former Ocean City Councilman Vince Gisriel, who brought the issue to the town's elected officials, questioned the impact of a bank of smart meters on the value of a residence or condominium for rent or resale.

Smith reiterated the intent of the smart meters was to improve the utility's efficiency.

"We look at this as an opportunity," he said. "We take our responsibility as your power provider very seriously. We think this is going to improve service and reduce our outage responses. We're putting smart meters on homes, but we have smart equipment all over the grid."

The opt-out issue was one of great concern for many in attendance on Wednesday. The Public Service Commission in late February issued a directive providing an opt-out opportunity for those with concerns. Customers can opt out, or choose not to have smart meters installed, but opting out comes with a cost. Delmarva Power, and ostensibly other utilities dealing with the same issues, is charging those who decide to opt out a one-time fee of \$75, along with an ongoing monthly charge of \$17. Smith said the fees are related to the cost of providing both services.

"The opt-out requires some redundancies," he said. "Whether it's smart meters or analog meters that require physically recording energy usage, there is a cost associated with that. No matter what a utility does, there is a cost for service. For us to have two different systems operating comes with a cost."

Smart meters are ultimately expected to lower power bills for consumers, but many in attendance on Wednesday said the opposite was holding true thus far. During the question-and-answer period, one concerned citizen said her monthly power bill went from \$237 to \$461 this winter after a smart meter was installed at her home and asked the reason why for the dramatic spike if smart meters were designed to save consumers money. Smith explained the spike in the bill was likely the result of the unusually harsh winter.

"It wasn't just cold, it was historically cold," he said. "There were multiple days of single-digit temperatures and temps that didn't make it out of the teens. We saw that all across our service area."

Another concerned citizen questioned why the electric bill for a seasonal home that is unused for much of the winter went from a typical \$25 to \$30 to \$200 after a smart meter was installed. Again, Smith reiterated the winter was historically cold and likely caused the spike in the bill. He said Delmarva Power had a team on hand to follow up on any individual spikes on a case-by case basis.

Yet another citizen raised concerns Delmarva Power could and would arbitrarily use the smart meters to turn off or reduce power during times of peak usage. However, Farrell attempted to allay those concerns.

“There is a misconception that these meters have a switch that allow us to turn power on or off during peak usage times,” he said. “There is a switch, but it only benefits the consumer. It allows us to turn power on or off for a new customer or a customer that is moving, or during an attempt at collection when all other attempts have been exhausted and an issue can’t be resolved in any other way. Those are the only reasons it will ever be turned off remotely.”