

# **Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee**

SB 217

Testimony Submitted by:  
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## Testimony for S.B. 217

Chairman Schuler and members of the Senate Energy & Public Utilities Committee, I am Janine Migden-Ostrander, Ohio's Consumers' Counsel, and I am here to testify in support of S.B. 217 introduced last week by Senator Kirk Schuring.

Senator Schuring's legislation is really a very simple proposal that would require natural gas companies to read a customer's meter every month if a customer requests it during the winter heating season from November through April.

In Ohio, the revised code doesn't call for a specific meter reading schedule. Obviously natural gas companies try to read their meters on some type of schedule but are not held to a standard by law. The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) opened a case in May of this year to establish Minimum Gas Service Standards that would mirror the telephone minimum service standards and the electric service standards but the entry has sat idle since August after the parties filed their reply comments. Case No. (05-602-GA-ORD) would address many issues and include meter reading. Some gas companies filed comments that the legislature has not given the PUCO the power to establish these standards. We would argue otherwise but if that be the case, then this legislation would be a beginning in establishing meaningful standards for at least meter reading.

As you might have seen in an article this morning in The Columbus Dispatch the PUCO is fearful that gas meters across Ohio might have faulty couplings and cause dangerous situations for Ohio's homeowners. We would suggest with a regular meter reading

schedule in the winter, natural gas companies would help themselves and the homeowners by checking these couplings every month upon reading the meter.

Obviously reading a meter might not always be possible with weather conditions, people not at home when meters are not accessible from outside the home, and other issues that might arise. In those instances many companies will allow customers to read their own meters and either phone in the readings, go onto the internet and record the readings, or fill out a card that has been left on the door and mail it into the company. The companies have the discretion to accept or not, the meter reading that the customer has provided.

As the residential utility consumer advocate, the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel believes that this legislation only helps customers that absolutely want an accurate reading of their gas meters every month if for nothing else than for budgetary purposes. This legislation also gives customers immediate support for those that are conscientiously trying to conserve on their energy usage by turning back thermostats, changing filters in their furnaces, sealing their houses for drafts and lowering hot water tank temperatures. With the monthly Gas Cost Recovery (GCR) charge changing every month rather than quarterly and knowing that the GCR makes up approximately 80% of a customer's bill, an estimate based on the previous years' usage could result in large fluctuations. With natural gas costs increasing from \$2.00 per mcf in the 1990s to over \$13.00 per mcf this year it is important to give customers complete and accurate readings every month and we believe that Senator Schuring's bill is a very simple way to accomplish this task.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to pass this legislation is the right for customers to pay only for what they purchase and nothing more, and the right for the utilities to receive full compensation for what they supply and nothing less. With the gas cost fluctuating every month, the only way to accurately match up actual consumption with the price for natural gas during any particular month is to read the meter. An estimate may result in a mismatch causing customers to pay more than they should and in many instances exceed their budgets. This problem can be exacerbated if a meter is not read for many months. Fairness dictates that customers have the opportunity to be sure that they are getting what they pay for. That the utilities are not held to a standard required in all other commerce in Ohio is not an acceptable outcome. This legislation should therefore be passed. All that is requested by requiring that the meter is read is really accountability that the charges on a bill are accurate and correct. This should not be a controversial request.

Thank you very much Mr. Chairman and I will be glad to answer any questions that you and the committee might have.