



# CONNECTED

The Newsletter of Cowlitz PUD

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## Cowlitz PUD Now Offers a Rate Discount for Low-Income Disabled Customers

The Cowlitz PUD Board of Commissioners voted unanimously in September to offer a discounted electric rate for qualified low-income disabled customers. The new program is similar to the Low-Income Senior Discount Rate program offered by the PUD since 2004.

Out of 21 PUDs in Washington which offer residential electric service, 11 also provide a discounted rate for low-income disabled customers. Neighboring PUDs in Clark, Wahkiakum, Pacific and Grays Harbor Counties are among those offering a lower rate.

It is expected that 400 to 800 customers will qualify for the new disabled rate. Based on that level of participation the annual net cost of the program will range from \$32,000 to \$89,000, including a Public Utility Tax credit provided by the State of Washington for rate assistance programs. By comparison, the PUD's projected total revenue for 2008 will exceed \$200 million.

Several Cowlitz PUD customers, along with representatives of area social service agencies, attended the Board meeting on September 11 and spoke in support of the program.

To be eligible for the new discounted rate, PUD customers must:

- ✓ Have been signed up for residential electric service for the past 12 consecutive months.
- ✓ Have documentation of a disability (handicapped parking permit or physician's certificate).
- ✓ Earn a disability income (SSI, SSDI).
- ✓ Meet the low-income standards.

### Inside This Issue:

- Meter Readers Assume New Jobs
- Commission Activities
- From the General Manager

The program offers two discount levels, based on a customer's annual gross household income. A 10 percent rate discount is available to customers with a combined household income of \$13,691 to \$20,535. A 20 percent rate discount is available to customers with a gross annual household income of \$13,690 and less. These income levels match the 2007 poverty guidelines, and 150 percent of the poverty level, as set by the U.S. Government for a two-person household.

Cowlitz PUD has contracted Lower Columbia CAP to administer the program. CAP will meet with each applicant to review all necessary documentation and determine if they are eligible for the rate discount.

CAP is now making appointments to meet with PUD customers who wish to apply for the new program. The appointments are being scheduled through March 31, 2008. The CAP office phone number is (360) 425-3430. Questions can also be directed to Cowlitz PUD.

### Low-Income Senior Discount Rate

The sign-up period for Cowlitz PUD's Low-Income Senior Rate Discount (SDR) continues through November 30. PUD customers who are 65 or older and have been signed up for service as a residential electric customer for at least the past 12 months may qualify if they meet the same low-income standards offered in the Disabled Rate program listed above.

Anyone who believes they meet the program requirements is encouraged to apply. Start by calling CAP at (360) 425-3430.

## AUTOMATED METERING: So what happens to the meter readers?



Bethany Moody will always have a “claim to fame” at Cowlitz PUD. She will forever be known as the last PUD employee to hold the long-standing position of Meter Reader. The good news for Bethany and all her PUD co-workers is that she loves her new job as the Accounting Clerk and plans to be here for a long time.

For many customers the meter reader is the “face” of the utility – driving and walking door-to-door across the county to read the gas, water or electric meter. In the course of their day a meter reader has a chance to see first hand what’s going on in every corner of the county, meet a lot of great people and occasionally face-off with a dog guarding its territory.

But like many things that have existed seemingly forever in our world, meter reading is soon to become a lost art. Improving technologies are creating a more efficient and cost-effective way to get the job done, not only at Cowlitz PUD, but at utilities around the world. As you may have read previously, Cowlitz PUD has begun a 4-year project to replace all electric meters with new, high-tech automated meters.

This advanced metering system will not only allow us to read meters automatically from the PUD office, but will also improve service quality,

efficiency and reliability, and provide the ability to offer advanced services to our customers. For example it will let customers monitor their electric usage online and set their own monthly billing date.

### Planning began in 2005

For many years Cowlitz PUD employed six Meter Readers – plus two Meter Reader/Service Reps. The service reps are responsible for collections work in the field, connecting and reconnecting meters and reading meters when a customer is moving in or out of a premise. That position will continue here at the PUD, as much of their work is not expected to become automated.

From the beginning PUD planners knew it would take years to complete installation of an automated system. So in 2005 as plans for the new system took shape, our meter readers were brought on-board and made aware that those positions would only last a few more years. The timing gave each of them several years to bid into other opportunities at the PUD.

“At first I kind of panicked when I heard about it,” Bethany said. “But then I realized there was plenty of time and it would be smart to ride it out for awhile and wait for a job to open up that I really wanted.”

Bethany, who has been a PUD employee for four years (3-1/2 as a meter reader), became the PUD’s accounting clerk this summer. “I’m an organized person and really like the paper work that goes along with my new job,” Bethany said. “I liked being

outside reading meters and meeting customers, but I like this too, and now I get to work with everyone else in the office.”

Besides Bethany, the other five former meter readers now work in a variety of PUD jobs – one as an engineering planner, one as a customer service rep and two in the PUD warehouse. The retirement of a long-time meter reader/service rep created a position for the other meter reader.

### So who’s reading meters now?

You will recall that the PUD shifted from bi-monthly to monthly billing in January 2006, which essentially doubled our meter reading needs for the time being. With automated metering on the distant horizon, and with no desire to lay off any PUD employees, Cowlitz PUD decided to contract-out its meter reading work until the day the automated system is installed and operable. That is expected to happen in 2011. Accu-Read (Spokane-based company) is filling that role and today employs 10 meter readers. All are local residents.

### A progress report on the new system

Following the successful installation of 100 test meters in June and July, the PUD stepped up the schedule and is close to installing its goal of 1,500 automated meters in 2007. This includes homes and businesses in the Longview industrial area, residential neighborhoods from 16th to 26th (between Industrial Way and Nichols Blvd.), parts of the Broadway addition and Downtown Longview.

*continued on page 3*



## From the General Manager's Point-of-View...

One of the first newsletter columns I wrote after becoming General Manager in 2005 touched on the issue of aging infrastructure. I wrote: "*As a member of the Baby Boom generation, I recognize the benefits of the infrastructure built in the decades following World War II, including bridges, highways, water and sewer systems, hydroelectric projects and electric transmission and distribution systems. Today much of that infrastructure is showing signs of deterioration.*"



The recent bridge collapse in Minneapolis reminded me of those comments and reinforced the importance of keeping up with basic infrastructure needs. When we drive over a bridge, we assume it's safe. Events in Minneapolis tragically showed that may not be the case.

Americans take basic services for-granted, expecting that water, sewer and electricity will always be there. During any one-year period in Cowlitz PUD's service territory the power is flowing 99.9 percent of the time. That does not mean we don't have challenges ahead if we want to maintain a level of reliability which our customers deserve and expect.

In that same 2005 newsletter article, I reported some of our distribution and transmission facilities were getting old, and we were planning for needed upgrades and improvements. Since then we have begun making significant investments in our system. In 2007 we will spend more money than ever before on improvements to our power lines, substations and other electric infrastructure. We have been able to do this and keep electric rates at the same level as in November 2003.

The PUD is also updating a plan to ensure that our future capital budget monies are spent effectively. I applaud the hard work of our engineers, field crews and those who support them. And I commend our Board of Commissioners for having the foresight to take on this

challenge in a proactive manner.

While I think we are doing a good job locally, I remain concerned about the bigger picture. As a society we used to recognize the importance of infrastructure and were willing to invest in it, and in some cases accept some environmental impact associated with public works projects.

Not long after the bridge collapse I saw a column in *The Daily News* by James P. Pinkerton, a columnist from *Newsday*. Mr. Pinkerton, correctly in my view, pointed out that "...for decades now, both the political left and right have chosen to scrimp on infrastructure."

He pointed out that Democrats, beginning with Roosevelt's "New Deal" used to be the party of public works construction, but as environmentalists began to have more influence in the Democratic Party that began to change.

More than once it's crossed my mind that the political party that pushed for building our dams in the 1930s-60s now has many members who want to tear them down.

Pinkerton didn't let the GOP off the hook either. He recounted how Eisenhower championed the construction of the interstate highway system, but now many Republicans have developed a more Libertarian attitude and are too often unwilling to provide the financial support needed to build necessary projects.

Frankly I think he made some good points. I know that in my business new power generation projects won't be free, and they won't be free of environmental impacts. Ultimately if we want to continue to have what we have taken for-granted, we must be willing to spend the money on the necessary infrastructure just like our grandparents and parents have done before us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Skeahan". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

Brian Skeahan,  
General Manager

## Contact Information

Cowlitz PUD - 961 12th Avenue  
PO Box 3007 Longview, WA 98632  
(360) 423-2210 - Toll free WA (800) 631-1131  
website: [www.cowlitzpud.org](http://www.cowlitzpud.org)  
Email: [customercomments@cowlitzpud.org](mailto:customercomments@cowlitzpud.org)

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COMMISSIONERS: Buz Ketcham, Ned Piper,  
and Mark McCrady  
GENERAL MANAGER: Brian Skeahan  
EDITOR: Dave Andrew