

SMART METERS: POSITIVE BENEFITS FOR ALL

By Doug Everett

A lot of attention has been focused on the installation of smart meters across Georgia. Unfortunately, smart meters have been met with some negative press and questions from concerned customers. I would like to clarify what smart meters are and what they do in order to clear up false impressions.

I cannot talk about smart meters without first mentioning how we have rapidly accelerated into a highly technical age where computers do many of the things that were, for generations, done manually. From automated teller machines that can dispense varying amounts of cash in seconds, to shopping and communicating online, tasks that were once done mostly through personal interactions are now done using advanced technologies.

Millions of old mechanical electric meters are being replaced with new smart meters across the nation, including electric providers in Georgia. In fact, with full support and approval from the Public Service Commission, Georgia Power began upgrading to smart meters in 2007. As of November 2011, more than 2 million of the planned 2.5 million smart meters have been installed.

This installation of the smart meter technology has left some individuals confused and even angry. This stems from a general lack of understanding about the new technology being put into place. In addition, various online, print and radio communication resources are misrepresenting the true purpose of the smart meters. Here is a clarification of what smart meters are and what they are not.

First, smart meters do the same job as the old mechanical meters. They simply measure how much electricity flows into a customer's home or business – that's it. The difference is that smart meters read your meter remotely, while the old mechanical meters required a representative to visit your home to obtain usage data. Additionally, smart meters do not and cannot control or record the usage of each appliance in your home or monitor your actions. The meters simply measure electric usage. You may be surprised to know that smart meters have been used by Georgia Power to successfully read select meters for more than 20 years.

Our commission holds utilities accountable for providing consumers with safe, reliable and reasonably priced electric service. Smart meters allow electric utilities to accurately and reliably measure customers' electric usage in order to bill customers fairly, based on how much power they use. To ensure the new smart meters are accurately measuring electric usage, the commission requires that before any meter is installed, it must pass a stringent evaluation process. In addition, yearly sampling is conducted to ensure reliable performance.

Second, smart meters securely send electric usage readings via a licensed radio frequency. The data, which consists of the meter number and its usage, goes directly to the company's billing department, where each customer's bill is computed each month. No personal information is ever transmitted over the radio frequency. Once transferred to the billing department, the meter

number is matched to the customer's name and address. All usage data is proprietary and is not sold or shared with anyone outside of a customer's own utility.

The meters transmit data for less than a total of a second a day, similar to a garage door opener. There is much less exposure to radio signals from smart meters than from a cell phone.

Third, we are all concerned about the environment. Smart meters have allowed utilities to take trucks off the road, reducing gas consumption, traffic and air pollution because no one has to visit your property each month to physically read the meter.

In addition to environmental benefits, the meters have many current and future customer benefits which include:

- Reduction in the time needed to handle service orders, such as starting or stopping power.
- Innovative rate options to better match customer lifestyles – customers can better manage energy usage and control their energy bill.
- Reduction in electricity theft.

In addition, when electric service is disrupted by storms and other causes, smart meters use the new technology to let electric utilities know exactly where the outages are, which aids in restoring power more quickly and efficiently.

Finally, I have received some questions regarding the opportunity to opt out. There is no federal law that allows customers to opt out of having a smart meter. The only requirement concerning smart meters, set forth in the Energy Policy Act of 2005, is that utilities must provide smart meters to customers that request them. The Act was intended to facilitate the deployment and use of smart meters throughout the country. Allowing individual customers to refuse installation of smart meters would go against the intent of Congress, as well as the determination of the commission, approving and promoting the use of smart meters to modernize Georgia's electrical infrastructure.

Thanks to the actions of the Georgia Public Service Commission working with Georgia Power, smart meters offer positive benefits for all and the commission is convinced that the impact of the smart meter technology will be positive for consumers and the state of Georgia.

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