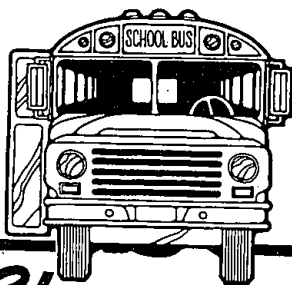


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Monday, August 22, 1983 O&E

(O7A)

MichCon's critics attack bill policies

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Michigan Consolidated Gas Co. found itself in a crossfire of criticism last week over its bill collecting practices. Ironically, the contradictory critics applauded each other during a state Public Service Commission hearing.

"Why don't they make a greater effort to collect from their own deadbeats?" asked Betty L. Bradley, Detroit retiree, during the PSC hearing in the Detroit City-County Building. She charged MichCon was inefficient at collecting bills.

But Detroit Councilmember Maryann Mahaffey blistered the utility because "people who do not pay their bills on time are characterized as deadbeats... This assumes people of the lower class are more dishonest than the middle and upper classes. They are not unwilling to pay, but unable. Why are all their proposals punitive?"

THE PROPOSALS she referred to are in a book called the "Energy Assurance Plan." Co-authors are the PSC staff, MichCon, which serves Detroit and some suburbs, such as Redford Township; Consumers Power Co., which serves other suburbs and most major outstate cities; and Detroit Edison Co.

The three-member PSC and the Michigan Legislature will decide the fate of the proposals.

The heart of the issue, according to the blue book, is this: "Increased energy bills and a depressed economy have created utility uncollectibilities which approach \$60 million annually and theft of energy which may now exceed \$20 million this year."

The costs are passed on to other customers at higher rates. They are also picked up, in a growing dollar volume, by state government's heating aid allotments to the poor.

The blue book distinguishes between "customers who cannot pay" and "customers who can pay, but don't."

The blue book's proposals for dealing with the latter group were outlined by a MichCon representative, Alfred R. Glancy III, senior vice president for utility operations. That was why MichCon wound up in the crossfire.

ARTHUR L. Suchodolski, West Bloomfield resident and former MichCon auditor, testified MichCon dealt in "shenanigans" with its uncollectible accounts.

"From August to December of 1975, very little or no chargeoffs of uncollectibles were made," he said, so that those amounts could be lumped into another year's bad debts. The purpose, he said, was to inflate the loss in order to make a case for a rate increase.

The state attempted to assist welfare

recipients with heating aid, but "many neglected to pay their heating bills, even though they had the money." The result was that the state paid the bills directly and, in effect, "paid twice for the same item."

Suchodolski charged the state program 1) gives welfare recipients no incentive to dial down their thermostats or insulate their homes and 2) "unjustly enriched the utilities" by giving them no incentive to collect bills.

Bradley, a widow who often appears at PSC hearings, told of her efforts to have MichCon write her a new bill after she changed residences, without success. "The utilities squander our money by failing to collect bad debts, building useless plants and high salaries for their executives," she said to much applause.

MUCH CRITICISM was directed at a rule which MichCon's Glancy said was aimed at halting "customers who switch the name on an account." The rule would allow responsibility for utility bills to be shared by "all adult members of a household who derive use and benefit from utility service."

Hodges E. Mason, president of the Chalfonte Community Council and chair of a local Democratic task force in Detroit, said the rule means "a roomer can be sued if the landlady refuses to pay the bill. Any adult living in a house will be in a position to be forced to pay the bill."

Mason told PSC administrative law Judge James E. Mehl, "I have no more respect for the PSC than a suck-egg dog."

Councilmember Mahaffey said, "In our experience, the gas company does not attempt to resolve problems. Its inserts and pamphlets (with bills) are only a partial help."

SHE ADVOCATED sessions in branch offices "to acquaint customers with ways to reduce their bills or work out payment systems."

A major problem, she said, is the class called the "new poor" — people who have exhausted their unemployment and Trade Readjustment Act benefits but are ineligible for welfare because they own their homes.

One rule aimed at the "don't pay" class would allow utilities to collect deposits "of three times the average bill where the customer has admitted to or has been convicted of fraud/theft."

"The company carries interest on the deposits," objected Mahaffey. BUT GLANCY said many blue book proposals were aimed at helping senior citizens and low-income persons with bill problems.

One batch of proposals would eliminate the state 4 percent sales tax on utility bills, allow home heating assistance when utility bills exceeded 13 percent of income, and grant 5 percent discounts to senior citizens.

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