

Suit attempts to stop furnace service plan

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their monopoly power to compete directly with the private businesses."

"WE SIMPLY don't see any merit in the charges," said Paul Knopick, Jackson-based Consumers Power spokesman. "We're going to defend ourselves vigorously."

The company has already mailed information on the plan to many customers, including those in Detroit suburbs, and will provide the service immediately to those that sign up, he added.

A preliminary injunction against the Consumers Power plan will be requested at a Nov. 16 hearing in Ingham County Circuit Court. The group is also asking damages and attorney fees.

Knopick denied that the plan would hurt small contractors, and said that in fact, Consumers Power has asked small contractors to work with them.

"Their men or women would be contracted to do some of the furnace service work for us," Knopick said.

But McCourt said he has been told that contractors would only be used by Consumers Power during the early part of the program.

CONSUMERS SHOULD also be concerned about the plan, McCourt said.

"I'm a business person, but I pay bills also, and I might subsidize a plan I don't use. I think all consumers should be concerned."

But Knopick said the company is regulated by the Michigan Public Service Commission, and there was no chance that consumers who did not pay for the plan would help pay for it.

Consumers Power, in fact, anticipates making money with the service, which would then benefit all customers, he said.

"The money we make from this can go back to reduce the overall cost of gas for customers," he said. "There's a potential that it will do customers good and no potential that it would cost anything."

McCourt also charged that the plan might eventually raise the cost of fixing furnaces.

"Once they have driven small companies out of business, they might raise the price," said McCourt, who said the \$49 fee is "far below" the market price for that service.

KNOPICK SAID that the program was "not breaking any new ground."

"There's a similar program offered by Michigan Consolidated, and by a couple of smaller utilities, so it's not like we're breaking any new ground — we're not."

At Michigan Consolidated, a representative confirmed that a Home Heating Service Program is offered for \$49.

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