

9,000 smart meters costing locals

By Sarah Sobanski

Over 9,000 smart meters aren't communicating properly with Hydro One in Bancroft.

According to a report submitted by Hydro One to the Ontario Energy Board (OEB), there are 110,000 Hydro One customers in Ontario that are deemed hard to reach, and 7,695 of them are in Bancroft. There are also 1,337 customers in Bancroft that have poor automatic meter reading (AMR) networks, meaning their meter communications with Hydro One are 'consistently unreliable.'

Local resident Catherine Leal, who has been studying Hydro One policy with colleague Mary Bates for the last three years, said this has led to many local residents being overcharged.

'Our area has more smart meters that don't work than in any other part of the province,' said Leal. 'I get angry when I think about all the people who are being overcharged, who don't understand their bills. They're paying these overestimated amounts and what they don't understand is that they're more than they should be and that's not right.'

Estimated billing is where Hydro One takes a historical look at what the customer has used in accordance with the same time last year. It then provides an estimate for what the customer should be charged currently. Leal said most times those estimates are grossly inaccurate. Smart meters improperly communicating with Hydro One is one of the larger reasons community members are facing such high hydro costs.

The report stated: 'currently hard to reach customers experience prolonged period[s] where there is no connectivity to the smart meter thus resulting in TOU [time of use] billing based on estimates for extended periods of time.'

Leal and Bates are working to help get the community ahead of its hydro crisis, which hit home this week with the Fix Hydro and Put Food In The Budget protest. Many members of the community participated in consultations across North Hastings, coming forward about their energy poverty.

'I think really that the customers are still receiving really poor treatment from Hydro One. There are still serious billing issues, and it's really causing a hardship from estimated bills in rural Ontario. I call it rollercoaster-billing,' said Bates. 'One month they get a bill for \$300, and then the next they get it for \$1,000. They have to pay them whether they're estimated or not and they're threatened with disconnects and retribution and charged late fees.'

Together, the pair hopes to bring events to the community.

'We want to teach people how to read their meter. The Ontario Energy Board to provide support to the consumer, put forward directions that Hydro One has to honour and accept customers' readings of their meters. For the two months your meter is not read you can send in your reading to Hydro One. On the third month someone comes and reads your meter. So if you have put in a lower reading it is going to come out in the wash on the third month, but 99 per cent of people don't do that. They take their reading, they send it in, and at least they know it is going to be accurate and they're in control,' said Leal.

The first step was working with the Bancroft and District Chamber of Commerce to get Hydro One ombudsman Fiona Crean to come to Bancroft.

'She's been touring all over Ontario for the last several months talking to people wanting to hear their stories about billing and customer service,' explained Leal. 'There are horror stories about people who have not received a bill, who have had overestimated bills, and not only that but also customer service [where] Hydro One is saying sorry you have to pay the bill or you're going to get disconnected.'

She added, 'The Ombudsman's goal is to explain to everyone, this is what my office does, and this is what I cannot do. I'm your advocate. If you have a problem you can come to me. She's going to share with them the process, that they have to go and try and resolve it through Hydro One themselves, first. If they can't resolve the issue, they've got someone to go to. She wants to hear what people's complaints are about their experiences, so when she goes back to report to the Hydro One board she has supporting evidence to work toward changing the system to better serve the customer.'

Next steps could range from billing information workshops to policy information seminars. As of right now, Facebook page [Take Back Your Power Bancroft North Hastings](#) is available for those looking for more information.