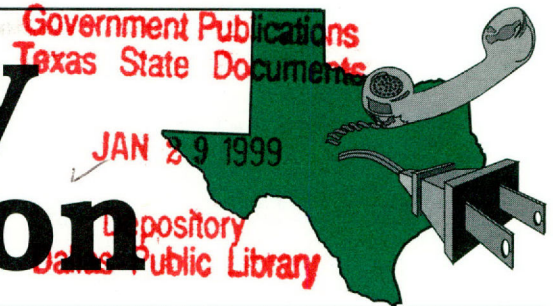


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Public Utility Connection



Volume 1 Issue 3

Public Utility Commission of Texas

Fall 1998

PUC proposes new anti-cramming rule

The Public Utility Commission of Texas (PUC) has proposed a new rule to prevent cramming -- unauthorized charges added to your telephone bill. The proposed rule would forbid local telephone companies from billing customers for services the customer did not authorize.

The proposed rule, introduced for consideration on Aug. 12, is very aggressive in its efforts to protect the Texas consumer. The rule would require written permission that the customer wants and is willing to pay for new telecommunications services. If a company bills a customer without permission, it has 45 days to remove the charges and provide a refund or credit.

Failure to do so could result in administrative penalties up to \$5,000 per day for each cramming violation.

Cramming is currently the second highest complaint to the PUC behind slamming. The PUC has received 5,283 cramming complaints since Sept. 1, 1997, among the highest rates in the nation. Since the Texas PUC first identified the problem in mid-1997, the Office of Customer Protection has worked with local telephone companies to remove these charges.

As the problem has increased and received greater national attention, many local telecommunications companies have worked independently and with federal

agencies to adopt best practices guidelines.

Recently, the PUC conducted a focus group made up of Austin-area cramming victims, and surveyed Texans who had been crammed (See story, p. 6). This direct input from Texas consumers will help solve the problem.

The agency also has worked closely with the telecommunications industry to find ways to end the practice, and hopes the new anti-cramming rule will be easily implemented and highly effective for the Texas consumer.

A public hearing on the rule will be held at 9:30 a.m. on Wednesday, October 28 at the PUC, 1701 N. Congress Ave. in Austin.

Right Numbers

Usually in this space we highlight companies with a high number of customer complaints: *Wrong Numbers*. In this edition, we highlight companies that have gone above and beyond the requirements to provide good customer service:

- **TU Electric**, whose service area was hit hardest during the heat crisis, contributed \$7.5 million to a program that helps low-income customers pay their energy bills. The company also set the standard for others by discontinuing residential disconnects beginning on June 23 and fostered an attitude at the company to help its customers.
- **Houston Lighting & Power** established a \$5 million fund for summer heat relief and began a new metering program which allows customers at risk of being disconnected for non-payment better control of their electricity use.
- **Entergy Gulf States** has changed the timing, tone and language of disconnect notices to be more customer-friendly.

Letter from the Commissioners

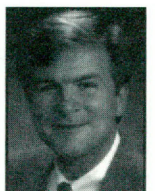
It's important utilities be factually correct

Dear Customer,

Customer satisfaction is a high priority for both the Public Utility Commission and utility companies. We want the customers who call us to feel their problem or question was addressed accurately and completely.

Solving customers' problems starts with being factually correct. Recently, we learned that customer representatives at four utility companies have misrepresented PUC rules and requirements to consumers, shifting blame for a company business decision to the PUC. Utilities should be answerable for their own actions. Apparently, some have not gotten the message. That is why we are taking this matter to you, the customer.

The Commission will take responsibility for the rules we have established for utility operations. But there is no PUC rule that requires customers be treated harshly or rudely. We encourage the utilities to be accountable for their policies and



Wood



Walsh



Curran

See PUC, p. 2



Government Publications
Texas State Documents

PUC urges utilities to be factually correct

continued from p. 1

practices, and to reform those that are not customer friendly. When utilities pass the buck to us because we are a convenient target, you lose the opportunity to have your complaint addressed. We work hard to ensure that Texans are protected against unscrupulous practices.

One utility, Guadalupe Valley Electric Cooperative, recently sent a disconnection notice to a customer with a good payment history. When the customer asked why he received the notice, the cooperative said the PUC required it. In fact, our rules set out procedures a utility must follow to assure that no customer is disconnected for non-payment of bills without adequate notice. This ruling is subject to rehearing.

Another customer told us that a Southwestern Bell customer representative told him that unauthorized charges on his bill came "direct from the PUC to Southwestern Bell computers."

A Fayette County Electric Cooperative customer wrote in July to say that the PUC was being blamed for a customer-unfriend-

ly disconnection notice she received. The cooperative not only told this customer that the PUC forces the company to send the disconnection notice, but that we were responsible for the tone and language used in the notice. This is not true; our rules do not require disconnection, much less dictate rude language in a notice.

Around the same time, customer representatives with AT&T were telling irate consumers that the PUC required the company to increase its One Rate plan from 10 cents to 15 cents per minute, and its One Rate Plus plan from 15 cents to 19 cents per minute for calls within Texas. These rate increases resulted from an AT&T decision to incorporate some federally-mandated cost increases.

Many utilities have customer-friendly practices. While our rules lay out the minimum standards for electric and telecommunications service providers, several utilities go beyond what the rules require to act in their customers' best interests.

Both TU Electric Co. and Houston Lighting & Power deserve praise for their

efforts during the summer heat emergency, signing up thousands of customers for emergency bill assistance and contributing extra funds to pay those customers' bills. And we thank Entergy for changing the timing, tone, and language on disconnection notices.

We remain committed to promoting excellent customer service in the industries we regulate. If any utility company addresses your problems or questions with, "the PUC made us do it," please call us at our customer hotline, 1-888-782-8477.

Sincerely,

Chairman Pat Wood, III
Commissioner Judy Walsh
Commissioner Pat Curran

Refund Numbers

The PUC Office of Customer Protection is pleased to announce that it has helped Texas electric and telephone customers receive \$497,536 in refunds over the past 12 months.

Public Utility Connection

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QUESTIONS OR COMPLAINTS

1-888-782-8477

customer@puc.state.tx.us

WEB SITE:

www.puc.state.tx.us

Caller ID units must show when telemarketers call

People with Caller ID should now be able to identify telephone solicitors and call them back. When they look at their Caller ID units, the names of companies should show up as well as a working telephone number. Beginning Sept. 1, telephone solicitors must meet new standards of identification on Caller ID devices. Companies which do not meet these standards could be fined \$1,000 per day.

Telephone solicitors or companies that use automatic dialing announcing devices (ADADs) must provide their company's name and a telephone number that can receive an incoming phone call. Telemarketers can no longer block numbers to prevent customers from knowing who is calling. They also cannot use a phone number that is only an outbound number, the type of numbers often used by solicitors.

House Bill 2128, sponsored in the 1997 Texas Legislative Session by Rep. Kyle

Jane and Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, authorizes the PUC to enforce the Caller ID provisions for telemarketers.

To catch violators of the new telemarketing law, customers must answer their telephones when their Caller ID boxes do not register the caller's name or telephone number. When you realize it is a telemarketing call, try to get enough information about the caller to file a complaint with the PUC. Only with your help can the PUC investigate violators of these new laws.

If you want to stop getting telemarketing calls, tell the company to put you on a "do not call list." If you continue to get calls, report it to the PUC's toll-free number, 1-888-782-8477.

People who want to be removed from national telemarketing lists may write to Telephone Preference Service, c/o Direct Marketing Association, P.O. Box 9008, Farmingdale, NY, 11735.



New Dallas, Houston area codes announced

The telephone industry has announced the new area codes for Dallas and Houston.

Dallas' new area code, 469, goes into effect in July 1999. Beginning Dec. 5, 1998, the boundaries between the 214 and 972 area codes will be erased so customers will need to dial 10 digits on all local calls. In Houston, the new area code, 832, goes into effect on Jan. 16, 1999. On the same day, boundaries between 713 and 281 will be erased and mandatory 10-digit dialing begins.

Since these area codes are being implemented as an overlay, they will serve the same geographic area as the other two area codes. You will not have to change your phone number.

An area code is part of your telephone number. So give it to people asking for your number. Just because you'll now dial 10 digits to make a local call doesn't mean you'll be billed for a long distance call. All long distance calls will still require the use of 11 digits. If the call was local before the area code change, it's still a local call.

Here are some tips to help you get ready for 10-digit dialing:

- Begin to practice dialing 10 digits on all local calls so you'll

be ready when your old dialing habits will no longer complete a local call.

- Reprogram office and telephone equipment like company PBX systems, speed calling and automatic dialing equipment, modems, security systems, cellular and mobile phones, fax machines and pagers.

- Use your area code when exchanging numbers with key contacts such as relatives and friends, employees, customers, business associates, suppliers and branch offices.

- If possible, program phones to automatically dial 10-digit numbers.

- In Texas, it is NOT necessary to dial a "1" or a "0" before a number for a local call.

- Thanks to 10-digit dialing, you don't have to change your area code.

So go ahead and order more stationery and business cards with your current number, but make sure the phone number includes your area code.

- Call your local phone company if you have more questions:
Southwestern Bell -- 1-800-869-5868
GTE Residential -- 1-800-483-4400
GTE Business -- 1-800-483-5400



Dial Ten Digits On All Local Calls

There are options if you don't use long distance

A recent trip by Commissioner Judy Walsh to Abilene's Rose Park Senior Center confirmed what the PUC call center staff had been hearing from Texas consumers: multiple phone bills are creating customer confusion. Many customers now receive one phone bill from their local phone company and another from their long distance company. Since long distance calls have traditionally been billed on the local phone bill, many customers think their local phone company provided both local and long distance service. Other customers think they have been slammed because they never selected a long distance carrier.

Since 1984, telephone customers have had a local and long distance provider. If you did not select a long distance company, the local phone company selected one for you. If you didn't make many long distance calls, you may not have realized you had two different providers. Now you may receive a long distance bill even if you did not make long distance calls.

Early this year, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began charging long distance companies fees designed to help pay the cost of telephone lines and to contribute to a fund providing telecommunications services to rural America, low-income subscribers, schools, hospitals and libraries. Most long distance companies are passing along these fees to their customers.

There are several options if you do not make many long distance calls and do not want to be billed mainly for fees. You can shop around for a different long distance company that does not pass fees through to customers. The per-call rates may be higher, but you will only pay when you make a long distance call.

Some long distance companies may allow you to receive your long distance bill through your local phone company, but may charge a fee for this option.

You can choose not to have a permanent primary long distance company by contacting your local phone company.

On the road...

September 17-18

For the second year in a row, consumer protection issues in the telephone and electric industries were hot topics at the Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce Business Showcase. Showcase visitors asked questions about common scams on telephone bills. Business customers had a particular interest in the status of electric industry restructuring in Texas.

November 1998

Rio Grande Valley residents who missed the opportunity to ask questions of PUC staff during a trip to the area in February, will have another opportunity this fall. Staff will speak to civic clubs in Hidalgo County on consumer protection techniques. Dates and locations of presentations will be publicized in the local media.



Saving on long distance

Comparing long distance telephone rates is difficult. To help customers choose a plan that best meets their needs, we have provided several long distance options based on usage habits.

September 1998

Minimum Users

These plans may be appropriate for customers who make fewer than 100 minutes of long distance calls a month. You may want to look for long distance plans that do not have a monthly fee or a minimum number of calls. Also look for lower fees and the option to have your long distance charges billed through your local phone company.

AT&T- One Rate**	Everyday 7a.m.-7p.m.	Everyday 7p.m.-7 a.m.	USF*	Carrier line charge	Local billing fee
Interstate In Texas	\$.15 \$.19	\$.15 \$.19	\$.93	\$.85	0
MCI	Everyday 7 a.m.-7 p.m.	Everyday 7 p.m.-7a.m.	USF*	Carrier line charge	Local billing fee
Interstate In Texas	\$.12 - \$.28 rate varies with mileage		5%	0	\$1.50
Sprint- Sprint Sense	Everyday 7a.m.-7p.m.	Everyday 7p.m.-7a.m.	USF*	Carrier line charge	Local billing fee
Interstate In Texas	\$.25 \$.25	\$.10 \$.15	4.5%	\$.85	0
Touch 1	Everyday 7a.m.-7p.m.	Everyday 7p.m.-7a.m.	USF*	Carrier line charge	Local billing fee
Interstate In Texas	\$.115 \$.115	\$.115 \$.115	0	\$.53	0

High Volume Callers

These plans may be appropriate for customers who make more than 100 minutes a month of long distance calls to numbers in Texas and out of state. While you may pay a monthly fee, once you make 100 minutes of calls, you will enjoy lower rates for calls.

AT&T- One Rate Plus	Mon.- Sat. 7a.m.-7p.m.	Mon.- Sat. 7p.m.-7a.m.	Sun.	Monthly charge	USF*	Carrier line charge	Local billing fee
Interstate In Texas	\$.10 \$.15	\$.10 \$.15	\$.10 \$.15	\$4.95	\$.93	\$.85	0
MCI- One Advance***	Mon. - Sat. 7a.m.-7p.m.	Mon. - Sat. 7p.m.-7a.m.	Sun.	Monthly charge	USF*	Carrier line charge	Local billing fee
Interstate In Texas	\$.12 \$.15	\$.12 \$.15	\$.05 \$.05	see below***	5%	0	\$1.50
Sprint- Sprint Sense Anytime	Mon. - Sat. 7a.m.-7p.m.	Mon. - Sat. 7p.m.-7a.m.	Sun.	Monthly charge	USF*	Carrier line charge	Local billing fee
Interstate In Texas	\$.10 \$.10	\$.10 \$.10	\$.10 \$.10	\$4.95****	4.50%	\$.85	0
Touch 1	Mon. - Sat. 7a.m.-7p.m.	Mon. - Sat. 7p.m.-7a.m.	Sun.	Monthly charge	USF*	Carrier line charge	Local billing fee
Interstate In Texas	\$.095 \$.095	\$.095 \$.095	\$.095 \$.095	\$4.95	0	\$.53	0

Note: Rates are per minute; USF, carrier line charge, and local billing fees are monthly charges.

* **Universal Service Fund** - A federal fee that may be passed on to a customer. Percentage charges are only applied to interstate calls.

** **AT&T One Rate** - Must use a minimum of \$3 in calls or you will be billed \$3.

*** **MCI One Advance** - Must use a minimum of \$5 in calls or you will be billed \$5. You must use 125 minutes (\$15) or the interstate rate increases to \$.15 a minute.

**** **Sprint Sense Anytime** - If you use over 300 minutes (\$30) the monthly fee is waived.



How much is your electric bill?

Residential rates for 1000 kilowatt-hours of service in September 1998

Utility	Rate \$	Utility	Rate \$
Upshur-Rural Co-Op (Gilmer)	\$ 57.71	Mid-South Co-Op (Huntsville)	\$ 75.35
Southwestern Electric Service (Jacksonville)	65.22	Pedernales Co-Op (Johnson City)	77.38
City Public Service (San Antonio)	66.42	Austin Energy (City of Austin)	77.40
Kerrville PUB	66.55	Tri-County Co-Op (Azle)	78.70
Victoria Co-Op (Victoria)	66.81	CoServ Electric (Denton County)	81.64
Southwestern Public Service (Amarillo)	67.04	Central Power & Light (Corpus Christi)	81.89
Bluebonnet Co-Op (Giddings)	69.64	West Texas Utilities (Abilene)	82.05
Southwestern Electric Power (Longview)	70.03	Erath County Co-Op (Stephenville)	84.09
Guadalupe Valley Co-Op (Gonzales)	70.07	Texas Utilities Electric (Dallas)	84.85
South Plains Co-Op (Lubbock)	72.08	Houston Lighting & Power (Houston)	87.32
Energy Gulf States (Beaumont)	73.22	Texas-New Mexico Power (Lewisville)	96.45
		El Paso Electric	109.50
Texas Average (surveyed)			\$ 76.58

Summer heat emergency rule expires

Texans must make electric utility payment arrangements by Oct. 10

If you delayed paying your electric bill this summer because of financial hardship, now is the time to make payment arrangements. After Oct. 10, you can be disconnected because of non-payment.

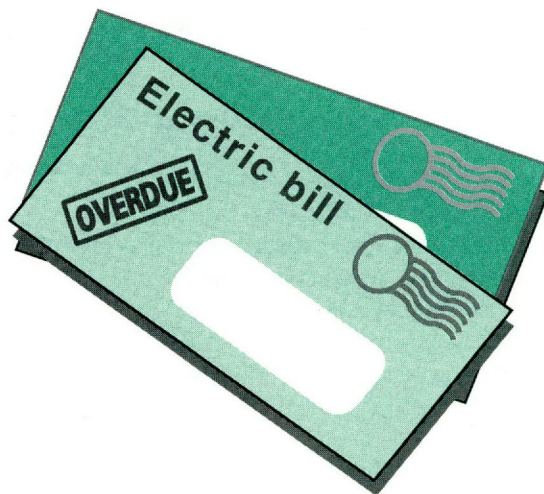
In early August, the PUC imposed a moratorium on disconnections of electric service for regulated utilities until Sept. 30 and mandated that customers be given an opportunity to defer payments of their bills. Even though customers were protected from disconnection during this time, they still must pay their utility bills.

Because of this summer's extreme heat, utility bills were high and difficult for sick, elderly and low-income customers to pay on time. Electric bills were 13 percent to 35 percent higher than average summer bills. The month of July was the hottest ever recorded in Texas history and the hottest on record worldwide. Temperatures in August and early September continued near 100 F in parts of the state.

Financial assistance and payment plans are available, but thousands of utility customers have not made payment arrangements and risk disconnection. Customers will have until Oct. 10 to work out payment plans, but shouldn't wait until the last minute.

The PUC emergency rule was intended to protect customers' health through the heat wave.

Twice this summer, President Clinton approved emergency federal funds for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Programs (LIHEAP), allocating a total of \$42.7 million to Texas to aid cus-



tomers. Several utilities also contributed shareholder money to programs to help at-risk customers pay their bills.

Several utility payment plans are available including deferred payment, extended payment plans and level billing plans. Through these plans, customers are given an opportunity to spread out their payments up to six months. Once on a deferred payment plan, customers must make their deferred payment each month as well as pay their regular monthly utility charges.

If you have any questions about electric utility billing arrangements, please call your electric utility or the PUC's customer hotline.



Texans assist PUC in cramming fight

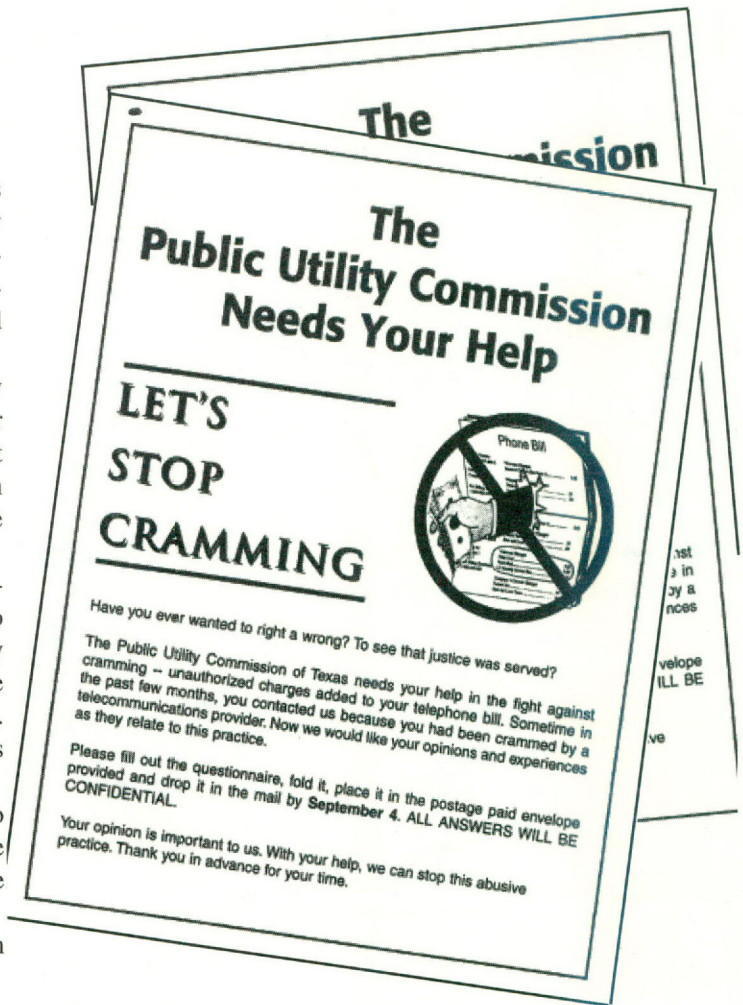
Have you ever wanted to right a wrong? To see that justice was served? The Public Utility Commission of Texas (PUC) recently asked 658 Texans to help the agency fight against cramming -- unauthorized charges added to your telephone bill -- by participating in a written survey. Everyone who received a survey had been crammed sometime in the past few months.

People across the state were asked such questions as who they held responsible for putting unauthorized charges on their telephone bill. They also were asked what method they thought would more likely deter offenders. Respondents were given an opportunity at the end of the survey to offer comments on the issue of cramming.

Apparently the survey topic hit a nerve, because an overwhelming 66 percent of the chosen participants took the time to answer questions asking for their opinions and experiences as they related to this abusive practice. In survey after survey, a message emerged: the PUC must do whatever it takes to stop cramming. The public is upset at being taken advantage of by unscrupulous telecommunications providers.

The PUC hears you. The agency has proposed a new rule to prevent and punish cramming. Results from the survey will be considered carefully by the Commissioners when they take up the proposed cramming rule at a public hearing this fall.

The winter edition of the *Public Utility Connection* will publish the detailed results of the cramming survey.



Electric restructuring issues

PUC studies programs available to low-income Texans

As the Texas Senate Interim Committee on Electric Utility Restructuring considered the future of the state's electric industry, it asked the PUC to conduct a study to identify the amount of Texas electric utility revenues that are used to support various low-income programs. The utilities that responded to the survey serve about 85 percent of Texans.

Eighteen percent of all residential electric customers in Texas are at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level, which means they earn an annual income of less than \$10,063 for an individual and \$20,563 for a family of four. These customers use 46 percent less electricity than middle income customers, but spend 13 percent to 44 percent of their total household income on utilities. An average Texan spends about 4 percent of his income on utilities.

Approximately one-fifth of 1 percent of



the \$17.6 billion Texas total utility revenues are used to fund low-income programs. Low-income initiatives are supported primarily through federal assistance programs administered by the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA). These federal funds have declined 30 percent in the last three

years, and TDHCA expects to serve only 8 percent of the eligible low-income households this year.

Customer rates are the second source of revenue for low-income programs. They provide 20 percent of the \$31.6 million used to support low-income programs. This provides special rates and weatherization programs for low-income, elderly and disabled persons.

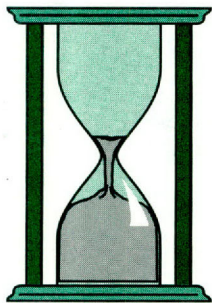
Voluntary customer contributions provide 5 percent of the support for low-income programs. These funds are primarily used to provide cash assistance to customers to prevent shut-offs. Low-income people in situations such as unexpected job loss and those with disabilities benefit from these funds. Shareholders generally contribute to these funds as well, accounting for 5.3 percent of the \$31.6 million that supports low-income programs.



Utilities make push for Y2K compliance

It's New Year's Eve 1999, and the clock has just struck midnight. What would you do if rather than blowing noise makers, throwing confetti, and kissing your mate, you suddenly found yourself surrounded by darkness without the use of a telephone?

When the new century arrives, it is essential that the electric power and telecommunications industries have computers that recognize the Year 2000 date. If these networks fail, it won't matter if others have their electronic house in order.



The Year 2000 (Y2K) problem is this: many computer

software programs store only the last two digits of the year. On Jan. 1, 2000, some computers will think it's Jan. 1, 1900. Some computers will assume that 2000 comes before 1999 and will ignore a century of information. Machines with time-tracking hardware and software built into them -- from personal computers to power plants -- could lose information or shut down altogether.

To combat the problem, the Public Utility Commission is monitoring Y2K compliance and preparations among utilities. Southwestern Bell and GTE, which serve more than 90 percent of the Texas local telephone market, have launched comprehensive Y2K preparedness efforts. Larger electric utilities and large municipalities have reported detailed efforts to identify Y2K problems.

In addition, the PUC has proposed rules requiring that regulated utilities file Year 2000 contingency plans. The rules should be approved by Commissioners this fall.

To ensure your electric and telephone service providers are Y2K-ready, we encourage you to contact your utility and ask for specific information about its Y2K plans.



PUC Commissioner Judy Walsh watches Chairman Pat Wood, III, act as a Relay Texas Agent during a demonstration call at the Sprint/Relay Texas 8th Anniversary Open House on Sept. 2.

Federal regulators propose new rules on relay services

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently proposed new rules on telecommunications relay services. Relay services include telephone interpreting service between hearing persons using a standard telephone and deaf persons using Text Telephones (TTY). A relay agent serves as the interpreter between voice and TTY recipient. The FCC has asked for comments on these proposed rules for development of the final rules.

Some of the proposed rules are:

- The cost of Video Relay Interpreting (which uses video-conferencing products so deaf persons can see live interpreters who provide relay service) and Speech To Speech (voice interpretation of a speech-disabled person's speech to understandable English for other parties) would be reimbursable by the federal Telecommunications Relay Service Fund. This would be limited to interstate calls only. These ser-

vices have not been reimbursed in the past.

- Speech To Speech services would be implemented by states within two years. Video Relay Interpreting will not be required at this time, but interstate calls will be reimbursable.

- The cost for same-language interpretation only, such as vocal Spanish to typed Spanish, would be reimbursed by the Telecommunications Relay Service Fund.

The Public Utility Commission submitted comments supporting the path that the FCC is taking to enhance the quality of relay services throughout the United States. The PUC disagreed with the proposed rule that multi-language interpretation should be limited to same language interpretation only. The Commission believes that the rule should allow different language interpretation; in other words from English to Spanish, or vice versa. The FCC should release its final rulemaking within a year.



Texas Utilities' Web Site Addresses

Local Telephone

ALLTEL	www.alltel.com
Brazoria Telephone Co.	www.btel.com
Cameron Telephone Co.	www.camtel.com
Cap Rock Telephone Co.	www.caprock-spur.com
Comanche County Telephone Co.	www.cctc.com
Etex Telephone Co-Op	www.etex.net
Five Area Telephone Co-Op	www.fivearea.com
Fort Bend Telephone Co.	www.fbtc.net
GTE	www.gte.com
Guadalupe Valley Telephone Co-Op	www.gvtc.com
Hill County Telephone Co-Op	www.hctc.com
Kerrville Telephone Co.	www.ktc.com
Lufkin-Conroe Telephone Co.	www.lctx.com
Southwestern Bell Telephone Co.	www.swbell.com
Sprint (United/Centel)	www.sprint.com

Electric

Austin Energy	www.electric.austin.tx.us
Bluebonnet Electric Co-Op	www.bluebon.net/bechome.html
Central Power & Light Co.	www.csw.com
City Public Service (SA)	www.citypublicservice.com
CoServe Electric Co.	www.dcec.com
El Paso Electric Co.	www.whc.net/epec
Entergy Gulf States	www.energy.com
Lower Colorado River Authority	www.lcra.org/energy
Houston Lighting & Power	www.hlp.com
Southwestern Electric Power Co.	www.csw.com
Texas New Mexico Power Co.	www.tnpe.com
Texas Utilities Electric	www.tu.com
West Texas Utilities Co.	www.csw.com

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