

Low-income users get energy bill relief

By JACK KING
Journal Staff Writer

The Public Regulation Commission is giving low-income energy users some extra leeway in their eligibility requirements for the winter moratorium on heating shut-offs.

According to changes in the state law governing the moratorium passed by the Legislature in 2007, customers who otherwise qualify for the prohibition against having their heat cut off between Nov. 15 and March 15 must be up-to-date on their bill payments before the moratorium begins.

But, under an agreement recently reached among the PRC staff, community activists, electric cooperatives and investor-owned utilities, low-income energy users who are behind on their payments can still be eligible for the moratorium, if they have entered into a payment agreement with their power provider and are current on

payments under that agreement by Nov. 15.

PRC commissioners approved a standard statement last month that utilities statewide must use to notify customers about their eligibility for the winter moratorium.

The statement reads: "Protection from winter shut-offs begins Nov. 15, 2008. To avoid potential disconnection of services please contact the Human Services Department for eligibility information for the Low Income Heating Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) at 1-800-283-4465. Your service will not be disconnected from Nov. 15, 2008 through March 15, 2009, if you qualify for LIHEAP and have no past due amounts or are making the agreed upon payments."

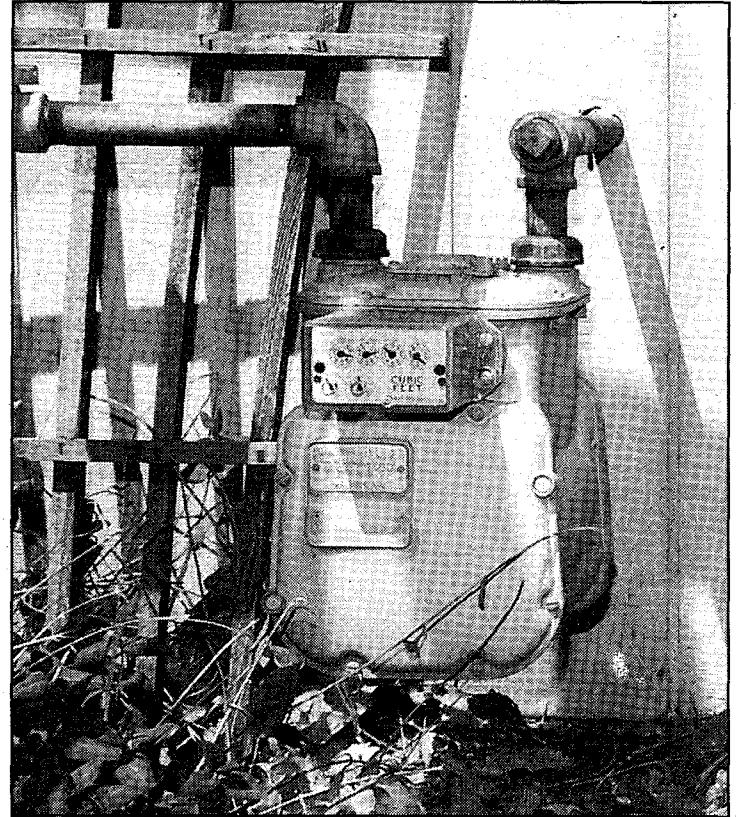
Consumers will begin receiving notices in this month informing them of the various payment options and of contacts for getting information on the moratorium.

The PRC staff and the various parties have held workshops since January aimed at working out a standard notice and firming up details of a new administrative rule governing the moratorium. Kira Jones, of Community Action New Mexico, said the parties have failed to agree on all issues.

"Community Action remains concerned that the payment plans being offered to low-income consumers are not appropriate to their circumstances," she said.

In some cases, the payment plans are as short as three months, meaning the monthly payments are beyond a low-income family's resources, she explained.

Rebecca Carter, PNM's regulatory projects manager, told the commission PNM would not like to see it set minimum lengths for the payment plans, because it wants the flexibility to tailor the plans to different families' needs.



A PNM natural gas meter.