

Vectren partner has eyed several rate hikes



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For most of us, the news of Vectren's merger with CenterPoint Energy sparked one question: will it affect my wallet?

It's an understandable concern. We're already paying the highest electrical rates in the state – and Vectren just got a hike approved by the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission last September.

For now, there's nothing to worry about. Rates are locked in for at least a while. Vectren CEO Carl Chapman even said the merger could lead to “consumer rate benefits” sometime in the future.

If that's the case, it goes against CenterPoint's recent business model.

In March, CenterPoint asked Texas' Railroad Commission – which, weirdly, oversees the state's gas utilities – for a natural gas rate increase. According to the Houston Chronicle, that's the third time the company has done so in the last three years.

Earlier this month, the company also proposed a bump in electrical rates. CenterPoint has said the hike

will help pay for everything from servicing an increased customer base to fixing lingering damage from Hurricane Harvey.

Texas residents aren't the only CenterPoint customers who could see a spike. The company does business in a litany of states – including Minnesota, where the company is seeking a 6.4 percent jump in natural gas rates.

Don't feel too bad for the electrical customers in Texas, though. They pay a lot less for power than we do in Indiana. And you might even want to extend a little empathy to CenterPoint itself, because it takes a heavy dose of bravery to raise rates in Texas.

Take a hilarious Associated Press report from 2012. CenterPoint was one of several utilities trying to install “smart meters” for their customers. It led to blistering Texas Public Utility Commission meetings, as well as some utility workers getting chased out of backyards by pistol-clutching grandmothers.

A few customers erected steel fences around their old meters to keep those meddling utility workers out.

Then there were the accusations of government surveillance. Angry Texans claimed the smart meters violated their Fourth Amendment rights by allowing police or local officials to “control” what residents did on their private property. According to the AP, all of it

forced the utility to include a slide in its presentation assuring residents that the meters “are not meant to spy on you.”

“It's Gestapo!” a Houston resident named Shar Wall reportedly said at a commission meeting in Austin. “I'm a redneck Texas girl, and I won't put up with it.”

Hopefully, we'll handle it better because the IURC has approved Vectren's plans to install smart meters here sometime in the next few years.

But we're getting off track here. The point is this: at least for the foreseeable future, your Vectren bills will remain the same. Deep in our hearts, every Evansville resident knows we will pay however much Vectren wants us to pay. It's not like we have a choice. They're the only power game in town.

And they're quite good at making money. According to a recent Courier & Press report by John Martin, Vectren even makes up for its own emergency efficiency program by charging some customers extra to offset the savings of others.

If Vectren wants you to enjoy “rate benefits,” you will. And if not, you won't. It all depends on how much money they think they'll need to operate.

No merger's going to change that.

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2018-04-25 Vectren partner hs eyed several rate hikes



Clipped By:

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Thu, Nov 17, 2022