

As PUD rates rise, CAP braces for spike in need for low-income assistance

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With Cowlitz PUD power rates expected to rise 18 percent this fall, Lower Columbia CAP officials worry that aid to help the poor pay their energy bills won't keep pace with the expected spike in need.

"It does concern us. We see demand getting greater and us having less ability to help," Ilona Kerby, CAP's director, said Tuesday.

CAP, the area's largest social service agency, manages the PUD's discount program for low-income seniors and disabled rate payers and other low-income residents.

Last winter, the agency doled out \$818,407 to 3,139 low-income households to help pay heating and electricity bills during cold months.

This winter, that number likely will be cut in half because of federal budget cuts to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, CAP officials said. The agency already struggles to meet demand without federal cuts, Kerby said.

There's always more demand than assistance available, Kerby said. "When we run out of money, we run out of money."

Last year the PUD's discount program for senior and disabled rate payers served 702 households, and the number will likely rise, utility spokesman Dave Andrew said.

He added that the utility expanded the amount of senior and disabled rate payers eligible for discounts two years ago and does not plan to do so again.

However, the utility has seen a recent boost from rate payers seeking to help the less fortunate during the cold winter months, he said. So far this year, donations to the PUD's Warm Neighbor fund have totaled \$44,000, up from the \$30,000 for all of last year, Andrew said. PUD employees contributed \$10,000 this year through fundraising events, he said.

PUD officials said Monday a rate increase is needed primarily to replace lost revenue from an expected dip in wind-energy sales to California, which normally offsets rate hikes, and to make up for increases in the cost of wholesale power the PUD buys from the Bonneville Power Administration. (The utility sells off its wind power instead of using it itself because BPA hydropower costs less than wind energy.)

The average Cowlitz PUD residential user would see a \$16 monthly increase under the proposed rate increase. An average monthly bill now is \$90, and it would rise to \$106 under the proposed hike.