

Kit Carson rate hike sees early protests

By Cody Hooks

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Not everyone is happy about Kit Carson Electric Cooperative's proposed rate increase.

As of Tuesday (Dec. 8), less than a week after Kit Carson officially filed for a hike in customer rates, the state has received 19 official protests from co-op members.

The co-op notified its members of a proposed price hike in November, but had to wait until Dec. 3 to officially file an "Advice Notice" with the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission (PRC), the state-level agency that oversees utilities and their rates.

Kit Carson members have until Dec. 23 to file a protest.

Carlos Padilla, a PRC spokesperson, said the state has received 19 protests via an official form and 15 protests via email and signed letters. "It is preferable if all protests are filed in written format with an original signature on Rule 17.9.540 Protest Forms," which can be found on the PRC website, he said.

"Protests submitted via email and signed letters are questionable as to their validity in the matter. This would be determined by the commission and Kit Carson," Padilla said.

By law, the PRC needs 25 valid protests to go forward with a rate-hike investigation. When Kit Carson sought a rate increase in 2010, the co-op argued that all but a handful of more than 300 protests were invalid. The PRC eventually dismissed that claim and went through with an investigation that resulted in one-half of the increase the co-op requested.

At a Nov. 17 Taos County Board of Commissioners meeting, Kit Carson CEO Luis Reyes announced a series of community meetings to "make sure our membership is informed [about the rate adjustment]." While Reyes encouraged members to participate, he said most folks are just too busy give the co-op much thought. "People think about Kit Carson twice a month: when you have an outage and when you get your bill," he said.

"Let's not spend half a million [dollars] protesting and arguing in Santa Fe [at the PRC] for things we can resolve here," he said.

Reyes told *The Taos News* Tuesday (Dec. 8) the co-op started the community meetings last week with two in Angel Fire and one in Eagle Nest. He said the initial meetings are to meet directly with people who have already filed a protest and address their concerns, while later meetings will be for the membership more broadly.

Reyes said most of the issues raised thus far were about low-use energy customers feeling a higher charge is unfair, though some say "they're on a fixed income, and this would be a hardship," he said. Still other protests deal with "diversification and debt," Reyes said.

Reyes also said that, depending on what "solutions" members bring to the co-op in these meetings, there could be some flexibility in the rate design, though probably not in the "total dollars" of the rate adjustment.