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- Westario Power application to OEB for slight raise in electricity distribution rate; customers had questions at community OEB meeting; MPP Walker says hydro bills not going down because government buying more expensive wind and solar energy; 'government wasn't there to answer those questions' (Owen Sound Sun Times, A3)

Westario increase planned; People at meeting about small increase to pay for system more interested in ways to save on use

Owen Sound Sun Times
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Byline: Don Crosby
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Westario Power customers didn't appear concerned about the utility's application to the Ontario Energy Board for a slight raise in its electricity distribution rate, but had other questions at a recent meeting in Walkerton.

The increase amounts to \$2.78 more a month for a typical residential customer.

About two dozen people turned out for the community meeting in Walkerton Wednesday to ask the independent energy sector regulator and Westario Power staff questions about the application and provide comments during a question and answer period.

Dave Leonce, vice-president of operations at Westario Power, explained that the rate increase is needed to maintain the utility's infrastructure. He agreed that the rate increase doesn't appear to be a concern for customers.

"I think our application speaks for itself," Leonce said.

Dian Foxton of Teeswater said she has tried all the conservation measures suggested to lower power use, but is not seeing any reduction in her hydro bill.

"We're quite in tune with the time of use rates, using the dishwasher, dryer and all those high-demand appliances on the low-demand times and not really seeing any

major changes; we're done, we're at our limit right now. We can't do any more," she said.

Francesca Dobbyn, executive director of the United Way of Bruce Grey, said there is a new program called the Affordability Fund that for people who do not qualify for low-income programs.

She described it as a program for higher income earners with high energy costs.

"They've done the light bulb thing, maybe they need windows, maybe they need insulation. It also works for tenants as well as homeowners," she said.

Dobbyn said capital improvement and depreciation are issues facing utilities but, she expects that the Fair Hydro plan initiated by the government in 2017 will step in if the increases are greater than inflation.

Foxton said she thought Westario made a strong case for its rate increase.

"They have a product to sell and they have to keep up with infrastructure, that's just a given. They are not talking about increasing wages, or increased compensation, they are talking strictly the replacement... I'm quite comfortable with that. I think it all makes sense. The money has to come from someplace," she said.

The OEB has just begun reviewing Westario Power's rate application. Reviews typically take between six and nine months to allow the regulator time to properly examine all of the evidence in the case. The timeline also provides customers of the utility, stakeholders and other interested parties to be heard by the OEB.

"The utility has to prove to the OEB that it needs a rate increase," said James Sidlofsky, legal counsel for the OEB. He noted utilities rarely get all they ask for.

He said that that between 2009 and 2016 the OEB reviewed more than 130 major rate applications and reduced requested rate increases by an average of 40 per cent.

"Overall, the OEB has kept the annual growth in the average distribution rates close to the rate of inflation over the same period," Sidlofsky, said.

He said since 2016, the OEB has held more than 30 community meetings. Feedback from community meetings helps inform the OEB's final rate decision.

The amounts requested by Westario Power in its application to the OEB relate to its distribution business and does not reflect any credits or other changes resulting from the Fair Hydro Act of 2017.

Westario is an electricity provider to 15 communities in Grey, Bruce and Wellington counties.

George Bridge, chair of Westario's board of directors, said he would like to see a better way to mediate close boundary disputes between Westario and Hydro One as the two utilities expand their coverage areas.

He said it's difficult to get the provincial utility to give up territory to Westario as the

service areas grow and neighbours are faced with different hydro rates.

“I think it should all come back to what is best for the consumer. At one time Hydro One may have been the only that had the infrastructure there; I understand they don’t want to give it up but at the same token what is best for the consumer,” he said.

Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound MPP Bill Walker said he thought it was good for people to attend OEB public meetings which provide the opportunity to see how the regulator works and how these type of applications go forward.

“People in the room were trying to figure out what the energy policy is and where that is coming from... there were a lot of questions about how do I save money and what was not being told tonight,” he said.

Walker said hydro bills aren’t going down because the government is buying some electricity produced by wind energy and solar at rates higher than the three cents a kilowatt hour from Niagara Falls or six cents from Bruce Power.

That is policy decision of the government and the government wasn’t there to answer those questions, said Walker said Westario was running a pretty tight ship.

“As Westario has said in its rate application if you want safe reliable, consistent energy they have to make sure their infrastructure is in place.”

“At the end of the day you have to separate the two components. They are running a distribution company, that’s their business, most people’s concern is how much energy they use and the cost to the portion of their bill,” said Walker.

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Illustration: Don Crosby, For The Sun Times / James Sidlofsky, legal counsel for the Ontario Energy Board, speaks at a public meeting about a proposed rate increase for Westario power to pay for infrastructure needs.;