

26 percent increase for natural gas

Average bill will rise \$19

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Cascade Natural Gas customers in Whatcom County will see their monthly bills spike by 26 percent beginning Saturday, Nov. 1 — a year after enjoying a big dip in prices.

An average residential customer, who uses 62 therms a month, will pay about \$19.31 more a month — for a total of \$86.64 — under the increase approved by the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission.

State regulators approved the higher rate because of increasing wholesale market prices during the past year.

"These prices fluctuate through the years. Five years ago, we had a decrease as well. I know people only remember the increases," said Marilyn Meehan, spokeswoman for the Utilities and Transportation Commission.

Cascade Natural Gas asked for the increase through its Purchased Gas Agreement filing, which tracks wholesale market prices and adjusts rates accordingly.

Last year, that trend was downward, prompting the commission to approve a 17.6 percent drop.

"Right after we did (that) decrease, they started creeping up," Meehan said.

Such rates reflect wholesale natural gas prices that gas distribution companies like Cas-

HELP WITH UTILITY BILLS

The Opportunity Council provides help to low-income Whatcom County residents who can't pay their natural gas, electricity and heating bills.

Learn more about its Energy Assistance Program by calling 255-2192.

The council's Web site is www.oppco.org.

cade had to pay in the past year, and the prices they expect to pay in the year ahead.

But the utility can't profit when it passes wholesale price changes along to customers, state regulators said.

The 26 percent increase is a concern for the Opportunity Council, which provides a number of social services to low-income residents in Whatcom County. That includes help with paying energy and heating bills through its Energy Assistance Program.

"That is going to impact the families that we serve. The good news is that we have some programs that can help address that need," said Erin Corday, program supervisor.

She expected to see more people asking for help.

"We've been preparing for an increased demand already because of the overall economic situation," she said.

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