

HARVEY KRONBERG'S QUORUM REPORT
TEXAS POLITICS REPORTING SINCE 1981
PO BOX 8 AUSTIN, TEXAS 78767
VOICE: 512.292.8191
FAX: 512.292.0099
EMAIL: HKRONBERG@QUORUMREPORT.COM

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Amid power grid concerns, PUC no longer a sleepy agency

The *Public Utility Commission* is in it for the long haul when it comes to unpacking problems following *Winter Storm Uri*, the two members acknowledged at this morning's PUC meeting.

Anger and frustration dogged the commissioners during remote public comments that opened the PUC meeting: A man from an oilfield solutions company faced a \$300,000 bill from Reliant. A small business owner had a \$15,000 bill from MidAtlantic that was as much as he spent on electricity in an entire year. And the owner of the non-profit low-income apartment complex for the elderly who could find no one to put her on an affordable payment plan.

Commissioners were prepared to face that kind of backlash after voting to end the moratorium on non-payment of electric bills. As Commissioner **Will McAdams** explained last week, payments need to enter the pipeline to help providers prepare for summer heat extremes.

The moratorium on the payment of electric bills will end tomorrow, June 18. Once notified of a potential disconnection due to non-payment of a bill, customers must be given 10 days to set up payment arrangements, per PUC rules. Disconnections cannot occur before June 29 and can be paused if a PUC dispute is filed. Details are available [here](#).

This morning, McAdams said PUC needs to hear feedback from customers, both commercial and retail, in order to work through the problems that may have occurred in retail electric provider billing. The time of PUC being a "sleepy little agency" are over, McAdams said.

"I would stress that a deregulated market does not mean that there's no regulation," McAdams said. "This commission exists to protect the consumer and to protect a healthy market that benefits all Texans. Those are my views on it."

As complaints come into the agency, PUC commissioners will be able to establish the rules and safeguards that will guarantee the problems of the February storm will not be repeated, McAdams said. Chair **Peter Lake** agreed, asking people with disputes or problems to contact the agency, with a commitment to read the "fine print" on retail electric contracts.

For the full list of communications to the commission on Winter Storm Uri – including letters from retail electric providers on payment plans – you can [go here](#).

Bill problems are expected to take two directions: One would be a bill the consumer considers accurate but cannot afford to pay. The second would be a bill the customer disputes, possibly given the terms outlined in the retail contract. Here are points made by PUC Deputy Executive Director **Connie Corona** in her discussions with the board:

Those who cannot afford to pay their bill should contact their provider. Most have indicated to PUC they are offering payment plans. PUC rules are that a payment plan can require no more than 50 percent of what is owed, with 5 subsequent payments. Retail providers also can offer more lenient terms for customers.

Those who have accurate bills but lack the ability to meet a payment plan do have options: call either 211 Texas for assistance or go to the TDHCA Rent Relief [website](#). They also can call the PUC customer protection division for

more information.

Those who have disputes about the amount of their bill should contact their retailer provider. IF that doesn't produce a solution, the customer can either file a complaint online or call PUC's customer protection division. Once the complaint is filed, the retail electric provider can no longer disconnect service or report the disputed debt to collection agencies.

That's what's currently on the books. Meanwhile, PUC is working to implement additional consumer safeguards under **House Bill 16**. Rulemaking on House Bill 16 – especially for the consumer component – will begin this summer.

This afternoon, Gov. **Greg Abbott** also appointed **Lori Cobos** as the third of three PUC commissioners. Cobos is general counsel for the **Office of Public Utility Counsel**. OPUC is focused on representing consumer rights before the PUC.

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