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Smart Meter Opt-Out Protects Personal Privacy

A Column by Rep. Jeremy Thiesfeldt

The heart of being an American consumer is having a choice--especially regarding matters of personal privacy.

Armed with \$3.4 billion federal stimulus (ARRA) dedicated to smart grid projects nationwide, or in efforts to enhance efficiency, many local utilities have mandated the implementation of “smart meters.” While projected efficiencies are laudable, personal privacy concerns oblige caution. Smart meters can cross the line guarding individual privacy and exploit a customer’s dependence on utility services for which there is likely no alternative.

Smart meters are electronic devices located on the customer’s premises, which can in near real time wirelessly report utility data. However, these meters can be capable of collecting far more than utility usage. When installed in a home using compatible appliances, they can track home occupation, security system presence and settings, schedule habits of residents, temperature, computer usage, value of electronic devices, etc. The list of potential data collection and subsequent vulnerabilities is almost endless.

Certainly customers may also benefit from smart meters. Home visits are no longer necessary to collect usage data, open faucets and leaks can be detected and minimized, power outages may be shortened, and faulty equipment may be detected quickly. Customers may also access detailed data of personal utility usage and adjust accordingly. On the other hand, rationing of services is also within the realm of capabilities.

Thankfully, it is currently illegal for Wisconsin utilities to sell or share customer data without consent. However, online data and wireless transmissions by smart meters are intrinsically tempting to hackers, unauthorized third parties, and potential warrants by overzealous law enforcement. On a wider scale, former Defense Secretary Leon Panneta once warned of a potential “cyber Pearl Harbor”, where hackers could shut down entire power grids based on smart meter data. On a smaller scale, there is a great potential for home intrusions and thefts by well-informed individuals or hackers. As internet access around the globe continually increases, the rate of cybercrime and online data manipulation also rises. Realists and intellectuals agree the question surrounding cybercrime is not *if*, but *when*.

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A simple internet search reveals a plethora of smart meter horror stories. In a recent story close to home, Audrey Parker, an 81 year-old Baraboo widow and great-grandmother, refused a smart meter in her home due to health and privacy concerns. Despite an extended dialogue with the utility company, her provider shut off her water for approximately four days before the Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC) stepped in.

Last week I proposed the Smart Meter “Opt-Out” Bill. It empowers Wisconsin citizens with the personal liberty to opt-out of mandated smart meter installation. People should maintain the right to control the distribution of personal information outside the walls of their home. With smart meter mandates, consumers are resigned to sacrifice potential privacy intrusions for essential services. Although some meters in Wisconsin may not currently possess severely intrusive capabilities, many with these capabilities do exist and upgrades are not far behind.

It is important to note, however, those exercising this choice will require an elevated level of service. Therefore, in deference to the likely majority who do not mind this intrusion, the bill also requires the PSC to approve a reasonable fee for those who opt-out.

The 4th Amendment of the Constitution clearly states “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects...” We must honor the Constitution and support any consumer’s decision to opt-out if they personally assume the associated cost. It is important to reasonably address this issue in its infancy to preserve reasonable privacy and prevent potential future incursions on individual liberties.