



“Smart Meter” Hearing in Texas Draws Crowds Seeking Opt-out

Hundreds of activists showed up at a hearing about so-called “smart meters” held by the Texas Public Utility Commission this week, with most of them seeking a way to opt-out from receiving one of the controversial electricity meters that critics link to [serious privacy and health concerns](#). A Republican member of the state legislature even promised that if the PUC refused to allow consumers a choice, he would introduce legislation to force its hand.



The federally backed meters have long been a source of controversy and criticism in Texas, which has rolled out millions of the devices in recent years and is reportedly almost 90 percent finished with its state-wide installation scheme. Hundreds of outraged citizens [sent comments to authorities](#) before the hearing demanding that their concerns be addressed, forcing the PUC to get a larger venue to hold the meeting. Most wanted the option to refuse a smart meter at the very least. Some were even seeking an “opt-in” system instead.

Opposition to smart meters in the Lone Star State recently exploded into the national headlines, too, when Houston-area activist Thelma Taormina [pulled a gun](#) on an aggressive installation worker who refused to get off of her property. “My main concern originally was the privacy — as far as I’m concerned this is a surveillance device,” We The People 9/12 activist group founder Taormina [told The New American](#) after her bold efforts to avoid having a smart meter installed on her property became a nationwide sensation.

Taormina was one of the many Texans demanding a public hearing on smart meters. And at the meeting, she spoke out forcefully, telling the commission that it had no lawful authority to force the controversial devices on citizens without at least giving them an option to refuse. It is also part of a larger problem: the continual erosion of liberty, she said.

“These people did not have the right to create a situation where people did not have the right to say yes or no to smart meters,” Taormina was quoted as saying in [local news reports](#). “Our rights as Americans are being taken away. Slowly, little by little, and this is just another example of the abuse of power by the bureaucracy.”

Other activists at the hearing echoed those concerns. Janise Cookston of the liberty-minded group We Texans, for example, blasted the bureaucrats who she said were acting outside of state law. “The law did not create a mandate for smart meter installation, and providers are acting beyond the purview of the law by forcing smart meters on customers,” she [explained](#). “It shouldn’t matter why [ratepayers] do or do not want the installation, they should have the power to choose.”

State lawmakers have expressed similar sentiments, noting that Texas law does not impose any sort of obligation on consumers to accept smart meters. Even before the PUC hearing, Republican state Representative Dennis Bonnen, who helped author the 2005 legislation on the devices, wrote to the



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commission saying he was “greatly concerned” that the scheme went beyond the scope of the law by imposing smart meters on Texans without their consent.

“This was not the intent of the legislation,” Rep. Bonnen explained.

Another Republican lawmaker, state Rep. David Simpson, attended the hearing and made similar remarks. “To some degree, as a member of the legislature, I feel I owe you members of the PUC an apology for making this your problem, rather than a problem for the Legislature,” he was [quoted as saying](#) by the *Texas Tribune*. “In hindsight, the Legislature should have specified a specific opt-out or even possibly an opt-in provision.”

After the hearing, Rep. Simpson said that if the PUC failed to reach an agreement allowing consumers to opt out, he would introduce legislation to create such a program, the *Tribune* reported. The commission, however, apparently was “noncommittal” on adopting any immediate changes, promising that the issue would be discussed at a future public meeting instead.

Among the citizens in attendance, some also complained about suffering from adverse health effects they said were the result of having a smart meter installed. The American Academy of Environmental Medicine, among other experts and organizations, has [warned](#) that the pulsed radio-frequency (RF) radiation emitted by the devices is connected to a host of problems ranging from cancer and neurological disease to reproductive disorders and immune dysfunction.

Other activists expressed fears over the privacy implications associated with smart meters, which keep detailed logs of energy usage and transmit the data to utility authorities at regular intervals. The devices can also control certain electric appliances remotely, sparking alarm among activists who worry that governments may soon try to limit energy consumption in keeping with the broader [United Nations so-called “sustainability” goals](#) outlined in the controversial Agenda 21.

Concerns over smart meter vulnerability to hackers featured prominently during the hearing as well. Even the U.S. Department of Energy, which is subsidizing the scheme with “stimulus” funds in an effort to create what the federal government calls a “[smart grid](#)” all across America, issued a report saying that firms were not doing enough to protect user privacy from non-governmental criminals.

The European Union’s privacy agency has outlined similar concerns. It [warned](#) in a recent report, for instance, that smart meters present “considerable risks” and enable “massive collection of personal data from households and may lead to tracking what members of a household do within the privacy of their own homes.”

According to news reports, several people at the Texas hearing including a representative from “Public Citizen” and an expert from the University of Texas at Austin downplayed the myriad concerns. Unsurprisingly, members of the PUC also tried to minimize the dangers, essentially telling activists that there was nothing to worry about and that most Texans did not mind the new meters despite the added surcharge on their monthly electric bills.

“We want to make it clear that the customer owns the data and can only have that released to other parties with their permission,” claimed the PUC’s Terry Hadley. “The challenge for the commission is how to balance the concerns of say, 700 to 800 Texans, versus the already six million Texans that already have these smart readers and are using them without any problems.”

A “senior market analyst” for the commission acknowledged that there were public questions and concerns about the process, but rejected suggestions that the Texas scheme was being directed by the



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federal government or the UN. The smart meter program, she added, was the result of the 2005 state law and did not happen overnight.

While the battle heats up in Texas, however, activists in the Lone Star State are hardly alone. Across America and even the world, smart meter opponents have been fighting back hard. In some jurisdictions, especially among cities and counties in California, policymakers have even adopted moratoriums on installing the devices. Numerous states including Nevada and Maine, meanwhile, have adopted opt-out requirements.

Taormina, the liberty-minded activist who pulled her pistol on an aggressive smart meter installation man who refused to get off of her property, still does not have one of the “surveillance devices” installed on her home. She is hoping, however, that other concerned citizens who reject the controversial meters can find an easier way to keep them at bay.

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Photo: (L to R) A George Washington impersonator, Thelma Taormina, and husband Nick in Dallas, Texas



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