

OUR VIEW

‘Smart’ electric meters are a useful tool, not a threat

Smart meters are coming to Volusia and Flagler counties but not everyone is happy about it.

Florida Power & Light Co. plans to install 200,000 smart meters in the homes and businesses of Flagler and Volusia counties — replacing the old-style meters that FPL employees have to read manually. This seems like a logical business move for FPL, but at a recent meeting of the Volusia County Council, some citizens demanded more say in the decision.

The council passed a resolution — which FPL doesn't have to obey — asking that FPL customers be allowed to opt into the smart-meter program. Essentially, the council fed the opponents the opt-in resolution though it has no teeth.

So what's the big deal? The fear is that some nefarious evildoer — in government or elsewhere — could intercept the encrypted messages that the smart meters intermittently transmit to the electricity grid, then to FPL. The information contained within is how many kilowatt-hours a customer is using or has used.

This would save U.S. power companies billions of dollars in costs that are now incurred by sending meter readers to every home and business. It's important to note here, too, that the old meters tend to be outside a home. Your meter likely can be read by anyone who walks into your yard and looks at it.

But somehow, according to the critics, this information becomes more

dangerous when intermittently transmitted to the power company via a radio frequency. What a shadowy person or group could do with this information wasn't really addressed by the opponents of smart meters at a May 3 council meeting. Perhaps a cadre of hackers could write an illicit term paper on local energy consumption.

But they couldn't add too much detail. The data doesn't include personal information, according to an FPL spokeswoman. It doesn't contain information on what electric devices are being used, either.

Much of the fear about smart meters has been driven by misinformation or fear floated on the Internet. It reminds us that one of the greatest technologies of the 21st century — the Web — can also be used to frustrate growth and technology.

Some of the conspiracy theories floated by people opposed to smart meters are bizarre. According to the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, “fringe” websites claim the smart meters — which use a radio signal to transmit coded data to the grid — will allow the government to spy on residents in their bedrooms.

Other websites warn the meters cause illness, or will cause domiciles to burst into flames. Many of those fears have been knocked down by academic studies. The smart meter technology is akin to a cellphone transmission, though it transmits encrypted data and is far less powerful than a cellphone. The smart meter is also not “always on.” It's an intermittent device.

About 3.2 million smart meters have already been installed in FPL territories. Of those, 2.6 million already are up and running.

The \$800 million project, funded in part with \$200 million in federal grants, will eventually reach all 4.5 million FPL customers. One major goal is to help power producers and power distributors have better information to meet peak demands.

Another goal is to help the customer monitor his or her usage. FPL will have an Internet-based “dashboard” that will allow customers to log into their accounts and look at their most recent energy usage. The customer can also look at forecasts of usage. This will help customers be better educated and encourage them to “turn down the dial” when they don't need to use much power or need to budget. Other service companies, including cellphone companies, provide this type of information now.

The smart meters are a step in the right direction, toward a grid and a population that respond quickly to peak demands and lets customers lighten the load when they can. The goal of the smart meter is better information, efficiencies and cheaper electricity costs. Those are worthy goals, and they don't require a sacrifice of health or privacy.

There are plenty of reasons for citizens to be concerned about privacy, energy costs and health in the 21st century, but the smart meter isn't one of them.