

BC Local News - Opinion

B.C. VIEWS: Going Gaga over smart meters



Noted physicist Lady Gaga has been invoked in a protest campaign against providing wireless Internet in schools.

ladygaga.com

[Buy Burnaby NewsLeader Photos Online](#)

By [Tom Fletcher - BC Local News](#)

Published: **March 15, 2011 12:00 PM**

Updated: **March 15, 2011 12:20 PM**

VICTORIA – This summer, BC Hydro starts installing 1.8 million smart meters to eventually upgrade every electricity customer in the province.

This is controversial for several reasons. First, they're doing it now because former premier Gordon Campbell decreed it must be done by the end of 2012. Second, the smart grid is one of several major BC Hydro projects the government exempted from having to undergo a cost-benefit review by the B.C. Utilities Commission.

And, of course, there is the budgeted cost of \$930 million, coming at a time when BC Hydro is projecting rate increases approaching 50 per cent over the next five years.

When I spoke with BC Hydro smart meter project executive Fiona Taylor last week, she naturally had no comment on the politics. Smart meters are inevitable, she said, since mechanical meters are obsolete and eventually won't be made any more.

Taylor insists the pending rate increases would be even higher without smart meters. BC Hydro estimates the wireless meters will not only pay for themselves, they will produce a net saving of \$500 million over the next 20 years.

Even some BC Hydro employees were surprised to hear that, with current technology, the utility has no way of knowing your power is out until you phone them. And when line crews come out to repair a local blackout, how do they determine if the repair is complete? They drive up and down the road to see if people have lights on. If you use a backup generator, they might miss you.

Smart meters will have "last gasp, first breath" capability, storing enough energy to send a signal that reports the power has gone out, and another signal when it is restored. As it stands, a repair truck can be dispatched to a reported power failure, only to find that the customer's main breaker has tripped.

There is another concern, which is that the brief signals emitted every few hours to send readings to a central hub are somehow a health hazard.

BC Hydro has retained former Vancouver medical health officer Dr. John Blatherwick to respond to this. He notes that smart meter signals are the equivalent of a three-minute cell phone call once per day, at a much greater distance.

These particular radio frequency signals are similar to those used for digital TV. Such signals are also emitted by the spark plugs of a car, by lightning strikes, in fact all visible light and even the infrared generated with your body heat.

But there are people who insist they have a greater sensitivity, and there will probably be some generalized hysteria and system-milking as we saw with the squabble over a power line through Tsawwassen.

The NDP is nurturing this flame of discontent as it campaigns against smart meters. It's popular among the young, and no less an authority than Lady Gaga is the poster girl to warn against wireless Internet in schools.

NDP leadership candidate John Horgan is the party's ranking power expert. He mainly argues that BC Hydro doesn't need to spend all this money on smart meters right now. But he is careful not to question the tinfoil hat perspective, and risk alienating the ignorant and superstitious vote. This is a key constituency in parts of B.C.

Blatherwick notes that "if you truly are harmed by this level of radiation, you can't live in a major city."

I'll say. The computer producing this column is on wireless, one of at least a dozen signals it can detect in my neighbourhood.

Our modern comfort is fragile, as Japan reminds us. It needs smart equipment, and smart people.

Tom Fletcher is legislative reporter and columnist for Black Press and BCLocalnews.com