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Controversial 'sub-metering' program in Hoboken suspended at Marineview Plaza

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Amy Sara Clark/The Jersey Journal

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Hoboken Councilwoman Theresa Castellano stands in front of Marineview Plaza, where a controversial sub-metering program was recently suspended.

After more than two years of tenants complaints, a "sub-metering" pilot program designed to save energy by allowing residents to pay for just the electricity they used has been suspended pending further investigation.

Tenants said that since the program was implemented, bills have been unpredictable and often exorbitant and that the meters must be broken. But electric company and Marineview officials said some tenants were simply using too much energy.

The cost of electricity used to be part of the rent at the complex. But roughly 2 1/2 years ago, the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities decided to institute a first-in-the-state "sub-metering" pilot program at Marineview Plaza, a middle-income, two-building complex with 442 studio, one- and two-bedroom units.

The rents were lowered by roughly \$100, depending on the size of the unit, and each tenant was supposedly billed for the amount of electricity they used. But as the bills started coming in, tenants began to suspect that the sub-meters weren't working properly, said First Ward Councilwoman Theresa Castellano, who led the push to end the program

"The disparity between the bills were outrageous," she said. Some people were getting billed \$38 a month and some people were getting billed as much as \$238, she said. The Jersey Journal was shown bills for three different units of between \$360 and \$463 for one month.

"The only reason the bills have been high is because some people are using a lot of energy. Most people on that site are saving money," said Dee Allgood, president of Metering Systems Inc.

As to whether the meters are malfunctioning, Allgood said, "We've tested and tested and tested until we're blue in the face. The meters work just fine."

Gary Backinoff, an attorney for Marineview Plaza said that the program was implemented to save energy and that between June 2008 and September of 2009 energy consumption in the building

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went down 38 percent.

New Jersey is one of the few states in the area that doesn't have a sub-metering program for state-regulated buildings, Allgood said, and it has one of the highest carbon footprints. "In my opinion New Jersey ought to be ashamed that they're wasting all that energy," he said.

Castellano, said she's all for saving energy. But that the difference between bills was just too great for the meters to be working properly.

Allgood responded that if a tenant has her heat eight degrees higher than surrounding apartments, it will use three times the energy.

"If their neighbors are at 70 and they decide they want to be at 78 degrees it could be a \$300 bill. If they left those things (heaters) on all the time, they could have an \$800 bill, easily," he said.

After the bills started coming in, residents and Castellano complained to building management and MSI. But they were told the system was fine. Soon Assemblyman Ruben Ramos, state Sen. Brian Stack, and Freeholder Anthony Romano, who lives in the complex, and Hoboken City Council joined the fight.

On Friday, the Board of Public Utilities voted to suspend the program by Dec. 31, and to investigate what went wrong, Castellano said.

"I'm thrilled, absolutely thrilled," said Dorothy Saenger, an administrative assistant who lives at the complex.

"I would get bills for \$80 and then the following month it would be \$100 and something. And what would be different?" she said.

The vote should cause residents of Union City's Union Plaza, 4501 Pallisade Ave., to breathe a sigh of relief. They were next on the list for sub-metering, said Mark Albiez, a spokesman for Stack and Ramos.

Castellano said she plans to investigate if any tenants will be reimbursed for what they believe is overpayment.

Backinoff said the building's owners would probably appeal the decision.

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