

Opinion: Liberty explains convenience fee

By Janine Irwin-Webb

As Liberty Utilities' senior manager of customer care, I appreciate the opportunity to address some of the understandable concerns and frustrations our customers may have over the newly implemented third-party convenience fee for online payments.

Liberty Utilities is a privately owned utility, but regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). The CPUC reviews all of the utilities' expenses and sets the rates charged to its customers. Consistent with utility practices across the country, the CPUC allows Liberty to assess the convenience fee paid to a third-party vendor for processing certain forms of payment. When Liberty Utilities began operations in January 2011 the existing rate tariff allowed the utility to assess this fee, but Liberty only began collecting it effective Dec. 4, 2013. It should be noted that NV Energy uses the same third-party payment administrator and charges a convenience fee similar to Liberty's.

The \$3.50 convenience fee is applicable only to payments made that require the services of Liberty's third-party administrator. These payments include any online payment involving a credit card or the one-time use of a debit card or electronic check. If a customer wants to make a payment over the phone using a credit card or a one-time use of a debit card or electronic check, this also requires the services of the third-party administrator since our customer service representative goes online to make this payment on the customer's behalf. The fee goes directly to the third-party vendor, and Liberty does not profit in any way from it.

Liberty recognizes that credit card payments and one-time debit or electronic check payments may be desirable to customers who are willing to pay for the convenience of this option. We also recognize that other customers may not want to pay for the on-line processing of their payment, so we continue to offer payment options that do not involve a third-party administrator.

There is no convenience charge for a customer who sets up automatic checking account deductions, pays by mail with a paper check, or pays in person with either cash or a paper check at one of our two locations. To further customize their payment option, customers can enroll in our Equal Payment Plan and/or select their payment due date. All these options can be found on our website.

Although we informed our customers about the implementation of the convenience fee several months earlier via statements on their bills and information on our website, we appreciate customers' input that we need to clarify the reason for this charge. We have made some changes to our website noting the fee is charged by a third-party administrator as well as noting other payment options.

At Liberty Utilities we understand that one size doesn't fit all, so we hope that these multiple ways to make your utility payment provides you with options that make your life easier. Please visit our website or call one of our customer service representations at 800.782.2506 if you'd like more assistance.

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