

Important Questions to Ask Before Selecting an Alternative Utility Service Provider

It is important to fully understand that you are entering into a private contract with an independent utility provider and that some of the consumer protections available under regulated utility service may not apply.

Why am I considering an alternative energy provider? Is your goal is to save money, to be environmentally conscious, to choose a renewable energy option or to take advantage of new features offered by the provider? Determining the reasons for considering an alternative supplier is critical in making the right decision for you.

Do you feel unwanted pressure to switch? Any legitimate offer of utility service should not rely upon pressure sales tactics. OPC recommends that you ask to be provided a full copy of the contract to review, including details of all charges and penalty provisions before making a decision to sign or agree to service over the telephone.

What personal information can a supplier require as a condition of service?

Under no circumstances should you be required to provide your social security number, bank account numbers, drivers license or credit card information before a contract offer is made. If asked for these items up front, OPC recommends that you take extreme caution. Use of your credit cards or bank accounts should only be an option for your convenience in making payment. You should also ask whether the company will run a credit report on your application.

Will my customer data remain private? OPC also recommends that you ask whether your personal information will remain private or will the company have the right to resell its customer list to businesses such as bulk mailers and telemarketers.

Has the alternative provider been authorized to operate in D.C.? For any offer you receive, ask whether the provider is approved by the Public Service Commission to conduct business in the District of Columbia. You can check the list of authorized providers at the Public Service Commission website: depssc.org.

What is the actual rate being offered? Whether your goal is to save money or to secure a specific type of service, you must not lose sight of the rate for the service. Can the provider guarantee in writing the rate you are quoted for the entire length of the contract?

Will customer service be satisfactory? Quality of Service is another key decision in selecting a utility supplier. An important measure is whether the utility supplier will provide customer service assistance at a local business office that is open to the public and if a local telephone number is provided for customer service inquiries.

Is assistance available to compare your existing rates with your current utility with those of the alternative energy provider? Utilities bills and the charges, taxes and fees outlined on them can be very intimidating. Most consumers

will find that they need an impartial third party help to break down the many items on the bill for comparison. OPC can assist you with this. A sample utility bill comparison can be found at www.opc-dc.gov.

Did you know that even if you change to an alternative energy service provider, your local utility will still get the energy supply to your home? In most cases, regardless of which supplier you choose, you will also remain a customer of the local utility for the purpose of service delivery. Therefore you must learn in advance how you will be billed, when the bill will arrive and when will it be due. It is your responsibility to be sure both companies are being paid in a timely manner.

What are the terms for cancelling a new energy service provider? Finally, OPC recommends that you carefully consider whether you have the option to cancel the contract upon request for any reason within the first few weeks, or at any other time during the contract term. Before signing or giving verbal consent, you should ask if there is a rescission period, and what penalties apply for early cancellation.

For more information, contact the Office of the People's Counsel at 202-727-3071, by email: ccceo@opc-dc.gov, or on the web: www.opc-dc.gov.



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