

Group says affordable energy needed as winter nears

PAYGE WOODARD

While temperatures are dropping, Sawyer MacNaughton isn't turning on the heat in her bedroom.

The Moncton woman said she cuts down on energy costs in the two-bedroom apartment she shares with a roommate by never turning the heat on in her room.

"Our building is old, so it's quite poorly insulated, so in the winter-time our energy bills skyrocket. We're paying so much more," she said.

MacNaughton, a member of the social and economic justice group New Brunswick ACORN, was part of the group's affordable energy rally in Moncton on Wednesday. A second rally was held in Fredericton, with both rallies raising the alarm of rising power bills as winter approaches.

The group's co-chair, Peter Jongeneelen, said the organization met with New Brunswick Energy Minister René Legacy, but said the minister did not say whether he was receptive to lowering energy poverty rates.

The group is calling for a moratorium on rate hikes for residential ratepayers and for the province to prioritize investment in renewable energy over fossil fuels, implement a low-income energy rebate program, to fully fund the enhanced energy savings program, prioritize incentives for energy retrofits for low- and modern-income rental buildings, and create an arrears-management program based on an ability to pay with flexible payment options and debt forgiveness.

Jongeneelen said the only call the group felt the minister was committing to was funding for green retrofits to apartment buildings, which he said the organization made clear should be done without renovations.

"There was some movement, but not as much as what we would like to see," he said.

In a statement sent to Brunswick News, Legacy said the department understands that many New Brunswickers are facing significant challenges with the cost of living, and concerns about energy affordability are especially pressing for households across the province.

"To directly address affordability concerns, our government has made historic investments in energy efficiency and introduced a 10 per cent rebate on energy consumption for monthly residential electricity bills. This measure was in response to the voices of New Brunswickers, and we remain dedicated to helping residents manage their expenses during challenging times," he said.

Legacy said as part of the department's broader efforts to stabilize energy costs, the government has removed NB Power's requirement to meet the 2029 equity target. He said this was done to avoid significant rate increases and put a greater focus on keeping electricity rates fair and manageable.

"Through the ongoing comprehensive review of NB Power, we are determined to ensure that every possible measure is taken to provide low and stable rates while maintaining reliable service," he said. "Our objective is to support



New Brunswick ACORN co-chair Peter Jongeneelen and members Shawn Dow and Sawyer MacNaughton at the group's affordable energy rally in Moncton on Wednesday. PHOTO: PAYGE WOODARD/BRUNSWICK NEWS

New Brunswickers not only in managing current energy costs but also in navigating the transition to clean energy in a way that remains affordable, competitive, and sustainable for the future."

Legacy said the department encourages anyone looking for ways to improve their energy efficiency to explore www.saveenergynb.ca. The site provides information on rebate programs, energy savings kits and "energy saving ideas" like installing a low "water efficient showerheads" and heat pumps.

"These resources are here to provide practical help in making homes more energy-efficient, reducing energy consumption, and, ultimately, lowering costs over time," he said.

With winter just around the corner, Jongeneelen said it's important that action is taken now. He said he has spoken with New Brunswickers who are hanging blankets around windows and doors and adding an extra layer of clothing to try to keep warm without increasing their power bill.

"There are times where it gets very cold and you have to have the heat on and turned up simply so that the pipes won't freeze," he said.

ACORN member Shawn Dow was also at the rally on Wednesday. He said heat is included in the rent at his apartment, but with power costs rising, he is concerned his rent may increase to cover the cost.

"That may happen," he said.

He said that with the cost of everything else going up, it's becoming more difficult for New Brunswickers to make ends meet.

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"Just the price of a piece of meat in the grocery store can give you a heart attack," he said. "Everybody is struggling with bills, and now NB Power will probably be raising rates yet again."

In October, the utility company sent a message to customers saying a new General Rate Application has been submitted to the New Brunswick Energy and Utilities Board for the 2026/27 fiscal year, requesting a rate increase of 4.75%.

"If approved, this will make a difference of approximately \$10.90/month for the average residential customer using 1,350 kWh/month. Changes would go into effect April 1, 2026," it reads.

Elizabeth Fraser, spokesperson for NB Power, said the corporation understands that affordability is a real concern for New Brunswickers, especially during the colder months when energy usage naturally increases to heat homes and facilities.

"NB Power remains committed to providing safe, reliable energy for our customers while keeping rates as low as possible," she said.

She said the goal is always to work with customers to avoid disconnecting service.

"It is an absolute last resort, especially in the winter months. We exhaust every option to make contact with customers to create payment arrangements that suit their unique situations and avoid disconnection," she said.

ACORN members spoke out at

the rally about cutting power in winter months.

"I think it is inhumane to leave them in a freezing cold apartment where they could be at risk," said MacNaughton, who has seen her own power bill double in recent years.

"Especially since the poorest among us are normally people who already have pre-existing health issues."

Fraser said if customers are unable to pay, they urge them to reach out to NB Power's Customer Care team directly, so they can explore financial assistance programs and find a solution that avoids disconnection.

"We recognize these are challenging times for our customers and we offer options to help them manage their overdue bills including payment arrangements and making sure they are aware of programs that might offer assistance," she said.

She said the Vulnerable Populations Committee was launched with government departments and social groups to find more ways to support those struggling with affordability and NB Power has also expanded its equalized payment plan to allow customers with arrears to register and spread their annual bill into equal monthly amounts.

"This will avoid higher bills in the winter months. We also offer an array of energy efficiency programs that can help customers save energy and reduce their bills," she said.