

1 1/17/2024 - National Fuel Gas Corp. - 23-G-0627

2 STATE OF NEW YORK

3 PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

4 CASE 23-G-0627 - Proceeding on Motion of the
5 Commission as to the Rates, Charges, Rules
6 and Regulations of National Fuel Gas
7 Distribution Corporation for Gas Service.

8 PUBLIC STATEMENT HEARING

9 DATE: January 17, 2024 at 6:02 p.m.

10 VENUE: WebEx

11 BEFORE: ALJ TARA KERSEY

12 ALJ MICHAEL CLARKE

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17 Reported by Annette Lainson
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2 (The hearing commenced at 6:02 p.m.)

3 A.L.J. KERSEY: On the record. I call
4 case twenty-three G O six two seven. Proceeding on
5 Motion of the Commission as to the Rates, Charges,
6 Rules and Regulations of National Fuel Gas
7 Distribution Corporation for Gas Service.

8 Good afternoon and welcome. My name
9 is Tara Kersey. I am an administrative law judge for
10 the Department of Public Service. With me today is
11 Administrative Law Judge Michael Clarke, also from
12 the Department of Public Service. Together we are
13 responsible for presiding over the hearings in this
14 case and the development of a complete record in this
15 proceeding. Assisting us today are Esmin Brown-
16 Anderson and Sangeetha Kailas from the Department's
17 Office of Consumer Services.

18 We're all here today for a public
19 statement hearing that was noticed on December 6,
20 2023. National Fuel Gas Distribution Corporation, or
21 N.F.G., filed amendments to its gas tariff schedules
22 on October 31st, 2023, proposing to increase its
23 annual gas delivery revenues by approximately eighty-
24 eight point eight million dollars which would result
25 in an estimated total monthly bill increase of

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2 hearing or a question and answer session, but rather
3 a forum to hear comments from you. This also is not
4 the only opportunity for comment. If you did not
5 register to speak at today's hearing, but you would
6 like your views included in the record, there are a
7 variety of other ways to comment that were listed in
8 the public notice for today's events. You can do so
9 by submitting comments on the Department's website,
10 by regular mail or by phone. Regardless of how the
11 comments are submitted, they will be given equal
12 consideration. Comments may be submitted and will be
13 considered throughout the pendency of this
14 proceeding.

15 Okay. We are ready to begin and have
16 four people registered to speak. When I call your
17 name, please speak slowly and clearly so that the
18 court reporter can accurately capture your statement
19 for the record. Please state your name and if you're
20 speaking on behalf of an organization, the name of
21 the organization. Our first speaker is Lindsey
22 Clinger.

23 MS. KAILAS: Lindsey Clinger, if you
24 have called into the public statement hearing, please
25 press star three on your phone so I can locate you.

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2 A.L.J. KERSEY: Ms. Clinger, if you're
3 there, please press star three to enable us to
4 recognize you and unmute your line. We have a number
5 of call-ins -- folks who called in by telephone. If
6 you're calling in by telephone, when we call your
7 name, you need to press star three which will enable
8 us to recognize you and unmute your line. Again, our
9 first speaker is Lindsey Clinger.

10 MS. CLINGER: Good evening. Thank you
11 for giving me this opportunity to speak. My name is
12 Lindsey and I am with I.B.E.W. Local 2199. I've been
13 employed by National Fuel for ten years as a customer
14 service representative at the Jamestown walk-in
15 office, also known as the Jamestown C.A.C.

16 Since the C.A.C. has not reopened
17 because of Covid, my job duties have now changed as
18 they are transitioning us to become phone reps. I'm
19 against the permanent closing of our walk-in offices.
20 There is still a need for face-to-face customer
21 assistance and interactions. From my personal
22 experience, there is a need for these offices to
23 remain open as customers ask me on the phone during a
24 call when the walk in offices will reopen. Customers
25 have stopped me in the parking lot when I am going to

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2 giving me this opportunity to speak. I am with
3 I.B.E.W. Local 2199 and my name is Melissa Thompson.
4 I work for National Fuel as a customer service
5 representative at the Jamestown walk-in office, also
6 known as the Jamestown C.A.C.

7 Since the C.A.C. has not reopened
8 because of Covid, my job duties have changed. I have
9 been employed at National Fuel for fifteen years. I
10 feel these walk-in offices should not be closed
11 because customer service is important to our
12 community members, especially to those who may not
13 have computers, cell phones or limited minutes, bank
14 accounts or credit cards. Customers are still making
15 payments through the drop boxes daily at our
16 facility. C.A.C. offices accept payments with no
17 additional fees. There are additional fees charged
18 when paying through a third-party. Customers
19 continue to come to our office to request to speak
20 with a representative for assistance. The foreman
21 next door have come over and asked us to assist
22 customers at their door. Thank you for giving me the
23 opportunity to comment.

24 A.L.J. KERSEY: Thank you, Ms.
25 Thompson. Our next speaker is Erin Dietrum. Hi, is

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2 this Ms. Dietrum? We can return to Ms. Dietrum if
3 she is on the line. Our next speaker is Sherrie
4 Sargent. Again, I just want to remind everyone that
5 if you are calling by telephone, if you could press
6 star three, that enables us to recognize you and
7 unmute your line.

8 MS. SARGENT: Hello?

9 A.L.J. KERSEY: Hi.

10 MS. SARGENT: Hi.

11 A.L.J. KERSEY: Is this --

12 MS. SARGENT: Good evening. My name
13 is Sherrie Sargent, member of I.B.E.W. 2199 and I'd
14 like -- I appreciate the time that you have given me
15 to speak today. I have worked at National Fuel for
16 over seventeen years and I'm currently at the walk-in
17 office in Cheektowaga, New York.

18 We have been a staple in this
19 community for over fifty years. We have vital
20 businesses in our building, Renal Care, Department of
21 Social Services, Catholic Charities and dialysis, all
22 of which are open to the public. We are located in a
23 very saturated, elderly community. These customers
24 go out once a month for their groceries, to the water
25 company, to their banks, all of which are open to the

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2 public. Daily we have people knocking on our windows
3 and our front doors asking us to be seen.

4 Small business owners looking for help
5 with security deposits, gas line installation
6 payments and other assistance to keep their op -- to
7 keep their business operating. I have been
8 approached many times in the parking lot by customers
9 who travel to see us, but are unable to come in.
10 After seventeen years of service, I will be displaced
11 if our office is permanently closed. For these
12 reasons, I ask that you keep us open to serve this
13 community as we have done for so many years. Thank
14 you.

15 A.L.J. KERSEY: Thank you, Ms.
16 Sargent. Thank you for those comments. I'm going to
17 return again and ask if Erin Dietrum is on the line.

18 MS. KAILAS: Judge Kersey, I have a
19 raised hand. I'm just going to unmute this person
20 and see who it is.

21 A.L.J. KERSEY: Great. Thank you so
22 much.

23 MS. KAILAS: I apologize, they lowered
24 their hand.

25 A.L.J. KERSEY: Oh, okay. There is

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2 someone with a raised hand, I believe.

3 MS. BECKSTROM: Yes, hello? Can you
4 hear me?

5 A.L.J. KERSEY: Yes, I can hear you.

6 MS. BECKSTROM: Okay, yeah. Hello.
7 Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

8 A.L.J. KERSEY: Sure.

9 MS. BECKSTROM: I am with the I.B.E.W.
10 Local 2199. My name is Erin Beckstrom and I have
11 worked for National Fuel for fifteen years as a
12 customer service representative at the Jamestown
13 walk-in office, also referred to as the Jamestown
14 C.A.C.

15 Since Covid, the C.A.C. has yet to
16 reopen and all of our job duties have drastically
17 changed. I am against the permanent closing of the
18 walk-in offices. There is still a need for face-to-
19 face customer assistance. From my personal
20 experience, there is a need for these offices to
21 remain open. As customers continue to come to our
22 office, they are knocking on the doors and windows,
23 asking when the offices will reopen. We have even
24 had to resort to putting up a curtain at the cashier
25 station to prevent the customers from seeing us and

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2 constantly knocking to get our attention, asking if
3 we are open or if we are going to reopen.

4 National Fuels walk-in offices were
5 open previously Monday through Friday, eight fifteen
6 to four thirty. These hours were convenient and
7 consistent for most of our customers to have face-to-
8 face contact and get the customer service help that
9 they needed or just simply pay their bills in-person,
10 which should not be taken away from them.

11 National Fuel is discouraging
12 customers from continuing to use the drop box at the
13 walk-in offices by mailing them letters to provide
14 them with other payment options. We actually have
15 customers who have written on those letters and then
16 dropped them back off in the drop boxes, telling us
17 to stop sending us those letters because they are
18 going to continue to use the drop boxes at the
19 offices instead of choosing the alternate payment
20 options. Closing these offices and removing the drop
21 boxes will have negative impacts on these communities
22 and our overall aspect of customer service as a
23 whole. Thank you again for giving me this
24 opportunity to speak.

25 A.L.J. KERSEY: Thank you, Ms.

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2 Beckstrom. Ms. Beckstrom, could you just spell your
3 last name for us please?

4 MS. BECKSTROM: Sure. It's B-E-C-K-S-
5 T-R-O-M.

6 A.L.J. KERSEY: Great. Thank you so
7 much and thank you so much for your comments as well.

8 MS. BECKSTROM: Thank you.

9 A.L.J. KERSEY: Thank you. Thank you
10 to everyone who registered to speak today. We will
11 now open the hearing to anyone in attendance who
12 would like to provide a statement, but who did not
13 register to do so. If you are participating
14 electronically and would like to make a comment,
15 please press the raise-hand icon in the bottom right
16 of your screen. Alternatively, if you have called
17 in, please press star three. Either option will
18 enable us to recognize you and unmute your line.

19 MS. KAILAS: We have a raised hand,
20 your Honor.

21 A.L.J. KERSEY: Okay. Is someone on
22 the line?

23 MS. BROWN-SWINDELL: Yes.

24 MS. KERSEY: Good evening.

25 MS. BROWN-SWINDELL: Good evening.

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2 Hello. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to
3 speak. My name is Tori Brown-Swindell (phonetic). I
4 am with I.B.E.W. Local 2199 and an employee of
5 National Fuel Gas as a consumer response
6 representative. My main job duty before Covid hit
7 and the closure of the walk-in offices dealt with
8 assisting customers at our Buffalo Place walk-in
9 office.

10 Now, National Fuel Gas has had walk-in
11 offices for decades. I remember my mother taking me
12 there when I was a little girl. We shouldn't want to
13 lose such a huge staple in our community. The walk-
14 in offices dealt with a vastly large group of
15 customers that loved the fact that we were there.
16 Politicians would walk into our office to make
17 payments directly. Why? Because it was so
18 convenient. They were provided with their receipt
19 and they knew that their payment was posted the same
20 day.

21 We would have property managers come
22 in to discuss or create accounts that couldn't be
23 done over the phone, probably for security reasons,
24 and they felt more comfortable bringing necessary
25 paperwork into the office. We would have our college

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2 students come into the office to apply for gas
3 service that didn't have the proper identification
4 when trying to place an order over the telephone,
5 especially the ones new to the Western New York area.
6 They would rather come into the office to present
7 their documents and not send them in by email.

8 We have our seniors that love the fact
9 that we were in the offices and we were open to
10 discuss their accounts. They felt there was a better
11 understanding sitting and talking with someone
12 directly and they also felt more secure knowing that
13 their payment, when they made their payment, it would
14 post immediately. We ask that you keep the offices
15 open to serve our community more efficiently. Thank
16 you.

17 A.L.J. KERSEY: Thank you so much for
18 your comments. Again, is there anyone else who did
19 not register, but would like to provide a statement?

20 COMMISSIONER MAGGIORE: Hi, this is
21 Commissioner John Maggiore. I just wanted to
22 identify myself as being on -- on this call and also
23 as a member of the Commission. I just wanted to
24 thank everybody who came out to participate in this
25 hearing. As -- as a member, it's important -- I feel

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2 it's important to hear how items that might come
3 before the Commission effect people, so. Also, as a
4 native Western New Yorker, I appreciate hearing so
5 many familiar Western New York accents. So I just
6 wanted to thank everybody and let you know I've been
7 listening to the whole call. Thank you very much.

8 A.L.J. KERSEY: Thank you so much,
9 Commissioner. We're fortunate to have you on
10 tonight. Esmin, are there any other raised hands
11 that we see? Anyone who would like to participate
12 electronically and make a comment? Just press the
13 raise-hand icon on the bottom right of your screen.
14 If you've called in, please press star three. I just
15 want to give anyone --

16 MS. GRAHAM: Hello?

17 A.L.J. KERSEY: Hi, how are you?

18 MS. GRAHAM: Hi. I'm sorry, I'm not
19 sure if you guys were hearing me. I'm sorry. Thank
20 you for the opportunity. I am with I.B.E.W. Local
21 2199 as well. My name is Tara Graham. I work for
22 National Fuel as a customer service representative at
23 the AppleTree office as well. And I'm, too, against
24 them closing the office due to the customers. I've
25 been there, I'm sorry, seventeen years as well. And,

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2 you know, every day we have customers knocking and
3 banging on our doors, down to the point where they're
4 calling the Cheektowaga police to come out in the
5 building with -- trying to get National Fuel to open
6 up the door to the building.

7 So at this point, I'm, you know,
8 feeling the same as all the others. I don't think we
9 should close the doors due to the fact that there is
10 a lot of customers out here that like to talk to us
11 face-to-face. I have also ran into customers in the
12 grocery store from coming in face-to-face and asking
13 when are we open, when are we open. Even when we
14 wear clothing with logos on it that says National
15 Fuel, I have customers that's asking me the same
16 thing. So at this point, I'm just thankful for the
17 opportunity to express my experience and hopefully we
18 can keep the doors open for those customers that
19 still bring in quite a bit of payments every day.
20 And again, thank you.

21 A.L.J. KERSEY: Thank you, Ms. Graham.
22 Thank you so much for those comments. I want to just
23 make sure that we're not missing an opportunity to
24 hear from anyone else who would like to speak. I do
25 know we have a number of call-in users. I just want

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2 to remind you, again, that if you've called in,
3 please press star three, which will enable us to
4 recognize you and unmute your line. If you would
5 like to speak, again, if you're participating
6 electronically, please press the raise-hand icon on
7 the bottom right of your screen. I'm just going to
8 give it a few moments in case anyone is attempting to
9 provide comments. Sangeetha, is there anyone who --

10 MS. KAILAS: We have one.

11 A.L.J. KERSEY: -- is looking to be on
12 -- we have one?

13 MS. KAILAS: We have a raised hand,
14 yes.

15 A.L.J. KERSEY: Okay, great. Thank
16 you.

17 MS. SMITH: -- Gabby and I am a
18 customer of National Fuel. Monthly I would always go
19 to pay my bill at the AppleTree office. Online it
20 does say that they are open. So I have traveled out
21 there with a newborn to pay my bill, only to get
22 there and discover that their doors are not actually
23 open. I'd much rather go in person to pay my bill
24 rather than do it online. So hearing that they might
25 close is really upsetting.

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2 A.L.J. KERSEY: May I just get your
3 name again?

4 MS. SMITH: Gabrielle Smith.

5 A.L.J. KERSEY: Great. Thank you so
6 much. And thank you for your comments. Sangeetha,
7 is there anyone else who looks to be unmuted?

8 MS. KAILAS: We have no raised hand as
9 of now, your Honor.

10 A.L.J. KERSEY: Okay. I want to take
11 this opportunity to remind members of the public that
12 they may submit public comments throughout these
13 proceedings by the other means that were described
14 earlier. And those means are also described in the
15 notice of public statement hearing issued on December
16 6th. You can comment by mail, by phone or on the
17 Department's website. And again, regardless of how
18 the comments are submitted, they will be given equal
19 consideration.

20 We also will be holding in-person
21 public statement hearings at the Buffalo and Erie
22 County Public Library at 1 Lafayette Square, Buffalo,
23 New York on Wednesday, January 24th, 2024 at one p.m.
24 and six p.m. So that is next Wednesday at one p.m.
25 and six p.m., we will be holding in-person public

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3 I, ANNETTE LAINSON, do hereby certify that the foregoing
4 was reported by me, in the cause, at the time and place,
5 as stated in the caption hereto, at Page 1 hereof; that
6 the foregoing typewritten transcription consisting of
7 pages 1 through 19, is a true record of all proceedings
8 had at the hearing.

9 IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto
10 subscribed my name, this the 22nd day of January, 2024.

11

12 ANNETTE LAINSON, Reporter

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