



# CUB's Guide to Avoiding Gas Rip-offs

*A guide to supplier offers and how they compare to Peoples/North Shore Gas*

A Publication of the Citizens Utility Board (CUB)

## Beware of bad deals

In Northern Illinois, consumers can choose to have their natural gas supplied by a company other than their regulated utility, North Shore Gas or Peoples Gas. This guide is in response to thousands of complaints and questions CUB has received over the years about alternative gas suppliers.

These inquiries have ranged from simple questions about choices in the gas market to

complaints about bad deals that led to hundreds of dollars in higher bills. They also include disturbing reports of sales representatives making misleading pitches and in particular targeting senior citizens, low-income people and non-English speakers.

**Warning:** In the current market, it is likely that the regulated utility—Peoples or North Shore—is your best choice as your supplier.

## This guide answers the following questions:

- How do I avoid natural gas scams?
- How does gas competition work in Illinois?
- Should I participate in competition?
- How can I tell if I am with an alternative supplier?
- What should I know about the offers from Nicor Gas sister companies?

**Plus, it includes these helpful tools:**

- A handy one-page flyer to share with friends and family.
- An apples-to-apples comparison between alternative supplier offers and the utility's price.

# Gas competition in Illinois

Peoples Gas and North Shore Gas customers are allowed to choose another company (also known as an “alternative retail gas supplier,” or “ARGS”) to supply them with natural gas. This program is called “Choices for You.” Alternative suppliers market their offers in a number of ways: door-to-door, over the phone and through the mail—but also at community events, through friends, and we’ve even received reports of suppliers working through churches.

## How does gas competition work?

Traditionally, a utility buys gas on the market and uses its pipelines to deliver that gas to your home. The utility is supposed to sell the gas at the same price it pays, with no markup. Opting for Choices for You means you will still pay Peoples/North Shore to deliver gas to your home, but you will pay a different company to buy and supply the actual gas. Unlike your utility, the rates and services of your new supplier are not regulated or reviewed by the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC). If there is a gas leak or any other problem with your gas service, you would still call the regulated utility, Peoples Gas or North Shore Gas.

## What consumer protections do I have?

Illinois law mandates:

- You have up to 10 days to cancel a contract once the supplier’s charges first appear on the gas bill

without paying a cancellation penalty.

- After that, no cancellation penalty can be higher than \$50.
- You must give consent, through a signature and a third-party verification process, before being signed up for a door-to-door offer.

## Should I participate in Choices for You?

There’s no guarantee you’ll save money. Since 2003, CUB has been monitoring alternative supplier offers, and the consumer group has found that about 9 of 10 offers marketed by suppliers have been money-losers. Remember, Choices for You is optional. If you don’t sign up, you will continue to be served by Peoples Gas or North Shore Gas, with rates regulated by the ICC. If you find gas choice too confusing or too risky, you’re not alone, and can opt to remain with the utility.

## How to avoid natural gas scams:

- 1) Be careful about people at your door who say they’re from the “gas company” and offer to lower your heating bill. Don’t give out your account number or gas bill unless you’re absolutely sure you want to sign up for an offer. A dishonest sales person who gets your account number can sign you up for an alternative supplier without your permission.
- 2) Find out what the company is charging and how that compares with the utility’s price. Ask whether it’s a fixed rate, and for how long, or a variable rate that changes on a monthly basis.
- 3) Ask if the rate is an introductory rate, how long it lasts and what the new rate will be. CUB receives a lot of complaints from people who say the low price they signed up for disappeared after a few months and their bill skyrocketed.
- 4) Ask if there is a monthly fee. CUB has seen fees as high as \$9 a month. That’s about \$100 in costs over a year, before you even use any gas.
- 5) Ask if there is an exit fee if you want to leave a plan before the contract is up.
- 6) If you don’t want unregulated companies to bother you, get on your utility’s do-not-market list. Peoples Gas customers should call **1-866-556-6001**. For North Shore, call **1-866-556-6004**.

# How do I know if I'm with an alternative supplier?

**Beware:** Even if you're with an alternative supplier, you will continue to get a bill from your regulated utility. Alternative suppliers include their charges on the supply section of your utility bill. People on a bad deal often tell CUB they had no idea they were with another supplier until their bill went up. Check your bill each month to see if you're with an alternative supplier. Here's where to look:

## On your Peoples Gas/North Shore Gas bill:

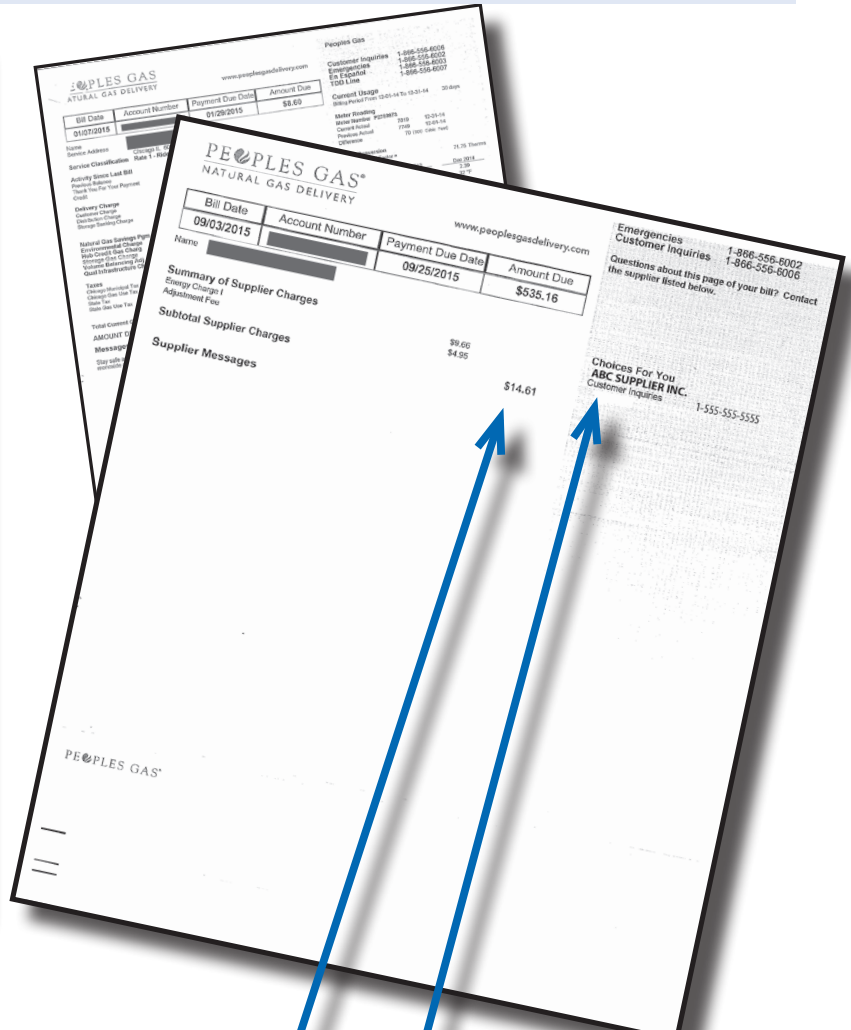
If you're with another supplier, that info is most likely on page 2 of your Peoples/North Shore bill, under "Summary of Supplier Charges." If the bill does not list a per-therm alternative supplier rate, you have to figure it out yourself based on the total supply amount and how many therms you used.

## To end an offer:

If you want to end an alternative supplier offer, call the supplier. The name and number of the company should be listed on your gas bill.

If you think you were fraudulently signed up, tell the supplier you want the exit fee—if it charges one—waived, and push for a full refund. (**Note:** Under Illinois law, a company is not allowed to charge you an exit fee of more than \$50.)

If you're not pleased with the company's response, or you can't reach it, file a complaint with CUB, at [CitizensUtilityBoard.org](http://CitizensUtilityBoard.org), or by calling 1-800-669-5556.



**PEOPLES GAS**  
NATURAL GAS DELIVERY

www.peoplesgasdelivery.com

Bill Date	Account Number	Payment Due Date	Amount Due
09/03/2015	[REDACTED]	09/25/2015	\$535.16

Name [REDACTED]

<b>Summary of Supplier Charges</b>	
Energy Charge I	\$9.66
Adjustment Fee	\$4.95
<b>Subtotal Supplier Charges</b>	<b>\$14.61</b>

**Emergency Customer Inquiries** 1-866-556-6002  
1-866-556-6006

Questions about this page of your bill? Contact the supplier listed below.

**Choices For You ABC SUPPLIER INC.**  
Customer Inquiries 1-555-555-5555

Please share this poster with friends and family.

CUB CONSUMER ALERT:

# BEWARE OF GAS RIP-OFFS

## 1) Look at your gas bill.

Is there a strange company listed in the supply section of your bills? You could be paying too much for an alternative gas supplier.

## 2) Ask these questions.

If you're considering an alternative supplier, or are already with one, ask:

-What's the price and how does it compare to the current utility supply price?

-Is the price an introductory rate that changes in a month or two?

-Does the supplier charge a monthly fee that inflates its advertised per-therm price?

-Does the company charge an exit fee for getting out of the deal early?

## 3) Beware....

...of people at your door who say they're from the "gas company." Don't give out your account number or gas bill to just anybody who asks for it. That person may be trying to sign you up for an offer without your permission.

## 4) Questions?



This alert is from the Citizens Utility Board (CUB), a nonprofit watchdog created by the state legislature to fight for lower utility rates. For more information, call 1-800-669-5556 or visit [www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org](http://www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org).

## Choices for You Prices as of May 2, 2018\*

Compare the prices below with Peoples Gas' current 30.65¢ per therm variable rate or North Shore Gas' 37.47¢ per therm variable rate.

\*This is a snapshot of plans being offered. The rates and details of these offers can change often, even daily. Beware that plans may change drastically after the initial term. A "Storage Gas Charge" may add a few dollars per month to Choices For You participants' bills. Please note that Choices for You customers may pay Peoples Gas or North Shore Gas slightly different delivery charges to pipe the heating fuel from their alternative supplier to their home. Call a company to verify all charges, to get a plan in writing, and to find out what happens to that plan after the initial term. The rates only reflect the price of natural gas. Peoples Gas or North Shore Gas will continue to bill you for the cost of delivering gas to your home.

Company	Offer	Term	Fees
<b>Ambit Energy</b> 1-877-282-6248	90.41¢ per therm variable rate (91.41¢ for North Shore Gas)	Monthly	No
<b>Ambit Energy</b>	33.80¢ per therm fixed rate (41¢ for North Shore Gas)	12 months	No
<b>Comcast Energy Rewards</b> 1-844-684-5506	44.9¢ per therm fixed / Peoples Gas 43.9¢ per therm fixed / North Shore	6 months	No
<b>Constellation Energy Services</b> 1-877-377-7297	39.9¢ per therm fixed rate	12 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Constellation Energy Services</b>	41.9¢ per therm fixed rate	18 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Direct Energy</b> 1-866-910-3401	39.9¢ per therm fixed / Peoples Gas 38.9¢ per therm fixed / North Shore	12 months	No
<b>Direct Energy</b>	39.9¢ per therm fixed / Peoples Gas 39.9¢ per therm fixed / North Shore	18 months	No
<b>IGS Energy</b> 1-888-995-0992	43.9¢ per therm fixed rate (for PG) 43.9¢ per therm fixed rate (for NSG)	12 months	No
<b>IGS Energy</b>	39.9¢ per therm fixed rate (for PG) 42.9¢ per therm fixed rate (for NSG)	12 months	\$50 exit fee
<b>IGS Energy</b>	37.9¢ per therm fixed rate (for PG) 42.9¢ per therm fixed rate (for NSG)	18 months	\$50 exit fee
<b>Just Energy</b> 1-866-587-8674	41.5¢ per therm fixed rate with 20% "green energy" option	36 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Just Energy</b>	42.5¢ per therm fixed rate with 100% "green energy" option	24 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Just Energy</b>	43.5¢ per therm fixed rate with 100% "green energy" option	24 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Illinois Energy USA, LLC</b> 1-877-292-9363	Lock 12, Flex, TruBalance plans (These plans are based on formulas known only to the company, so it is impossible to make an apples-to-apples comparison with Nicor Gas' rates)	Varies	Lock 12 and TruBalance charge a \$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill). Flex Plan has no fees.

<b>Company</b>	<b>Offer</b>	<b>Term</b>	<b>Fees</b>
<b>Illinois Energy USA, LLC</b>	16.0¢ per therm variable rate	Variable	\$1.99 Monthly fee \$50 cancellation fee
<b>Illinois Energy USA, LLC</b>	29.9¢ per therm variable rate	12 months	\$50 cancellation fee \$9.99 administration fee
<b>Illinois Energy USA, LLC</b>	44.9¢ per therm "PriceGuard" fixed rate	12 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Illinois Energy USA, LLC</b>	44.9¢ per therm "Price Guard for Renters" fixed	11 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Nordic Energy Services</b> 1-877-808-1022 www.nordicenergy-us.com	30.06¢ per therm variable rate	Monthly	No
<b>NRG</b> 1-855-674-7697 www.nrghomepower.com	49¢ per therm variable rate (3-month introductory rate.	Monthly	No
<b>NRG</b>	51¢ per therm variable rate (3-month introductory rate.	Monthly	No
<b>NRG</b>	55¢ per therm variable rate (3-month introductory rate.	Monthly	No
<b>NRG</b>	39¢ per therm variable rate (3-month introductory rate.	Monthly	No
<b>Realgy Energy Services</b> 1-877-300-6747 www.realgyenergyservices.com	31¢ per therm variable rate	24 months	\$2.50 monthly fee, \$50 exit fee
<b>Santanna Energy Services</b> 1-800-827-0067 www.santannaenergyservices.com	40.9¢ per therm fixed rate	6 months	\$9.99 monthly fee, \$50 exit fee
<b>Santanna Energy Services</b>	39.9¢ per therm fixed rate	12 months	\$9.99 monthly fee, \$50 exit fee
<b>Spark Energy</b> 1-877-228-9427 www.sparkenergy.com	41.0¢ per therm fixed rate for Peoples Gas 41.0¢ per therm variable rate for North Shore Gas	12 months	\$4.95 monthly fee, \$50 cancellation fee
<b>Viridian</b> 1-866-663-2508	49.9¢ per therm fixed rate for Peoples Gas 49.9¢ per therm fixed rate for North Shore Gas	12 months 25% green	\$50 exit fee
<b>Viridian</b> 1-866-663-2508 www.viridian.com	48.9¢ per therm fixed rate for Peoples Gas 44.9¢ per therm fixed rate for North Shore Gas	36 months 25% green	\$50 exit fee

<b>Company</b>	<b>Offer</b>	<b>Term</b>	<b>Fees</b>
<b>Viridian</b>	51.26¢ per therm fixed rate for Peoples Gas 51.26¢ per therm fixed rate for North Shore Gas	Variable 25% green	\$50 exit fee
<b>Xoom Energy</b> 1-888-997-8979 www.xoomenergy.com	41.9¢ per therm fixed rate	12 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Xoom Energy</b>	29.9¢ per therm fixed rate	4 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Xoom Energy</b>	39.9¢ per therm fixed rate	12 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Xoom Energy</b>	39.9¢ per therm fixed rate	24 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)
<b>Xoom Energy</b>	19.9¢ per therm fixed rate	Variable	No
<b>Xoom Energy</b>	\$39.99/mo fixed for 1,349 therms or less.	12 months	\$50 cancellation fee (10-day opt-out period after receiving first bill)