

The Maryland Public Service Commission submits this report in response to the 2021 Joint Chairmen’s Report from the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee and House Appropriations Committee, addressing the Committees’ interest in increasing the use of the Commission’s energy choice websites for electric and gas supply. Specifically, the Committees requested that the PSC provide data on the usage of the energy choice websites by month since the launch of the websites. The Committees also requested that the PSC provide recommendations to increase usage on these websites among residential customers and any other efforts to increase consumer education related to electric and gas supplier shopping.

### **BACKGROUND and USAGE DATA**

Residential electric choice is offered in the service territories of five Maryland electric utilities:

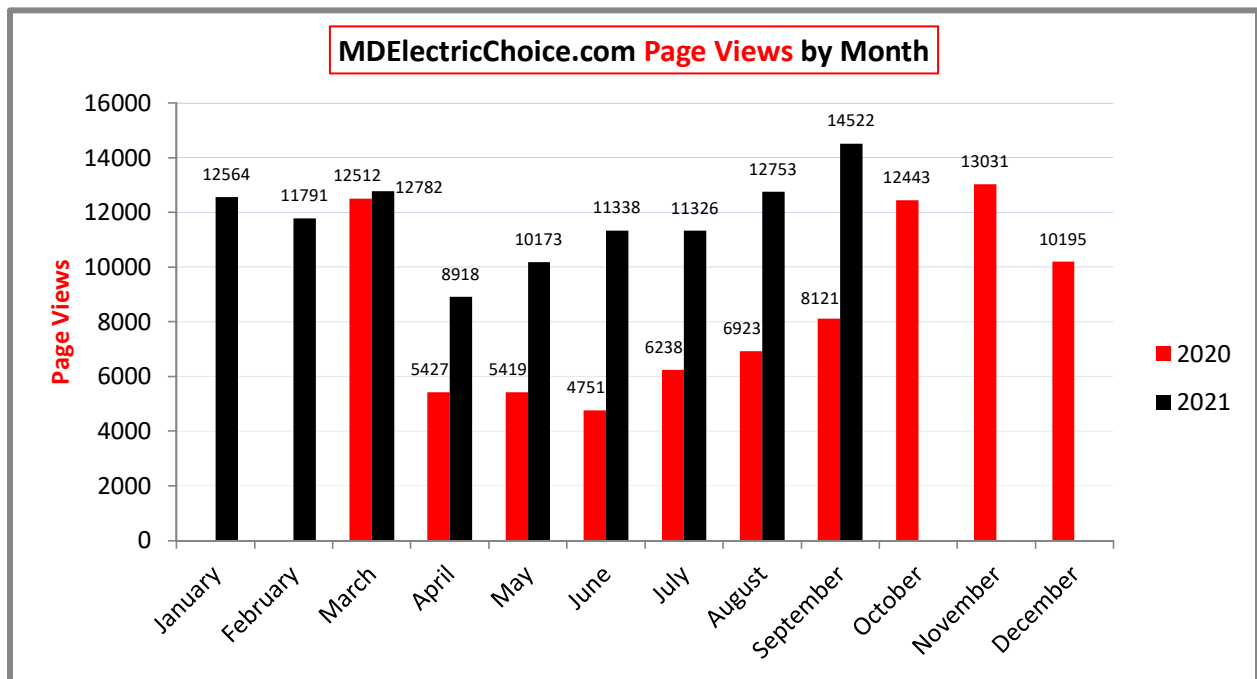
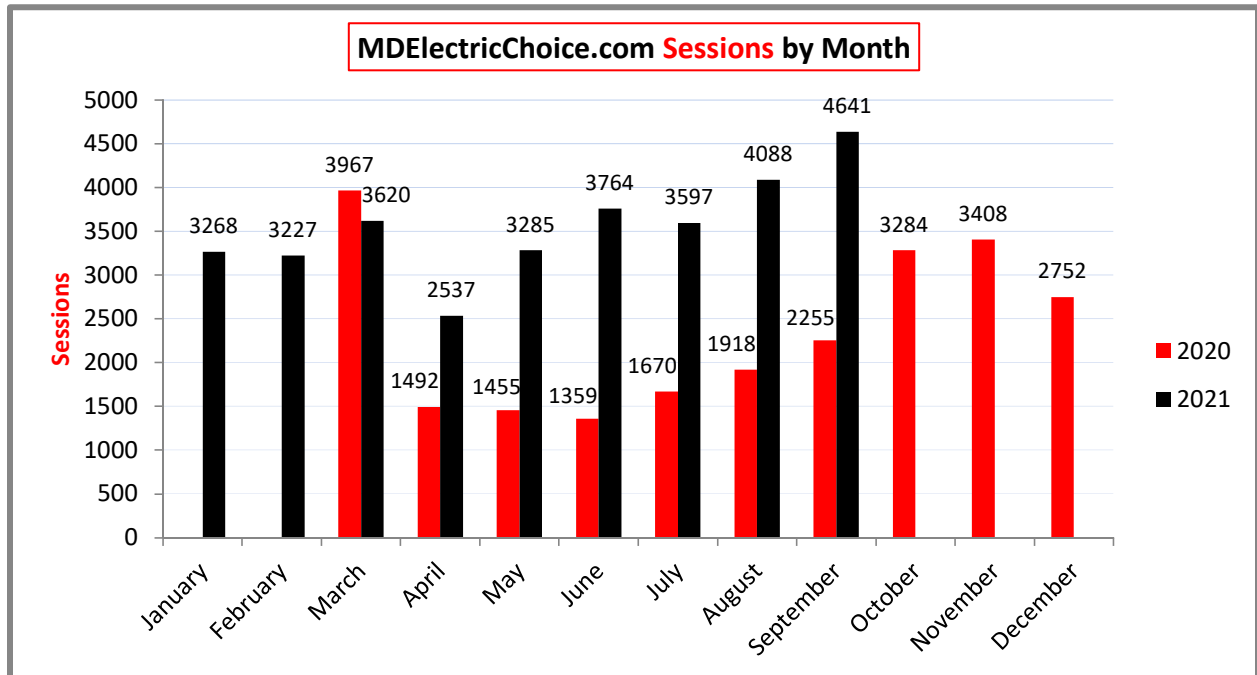
- Baltimore Gas and Electric Company
- Potomac Electric Power Company
- Delmarva Power & Light Company
- The Potomac Edison Company
- Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative, Inc.

Residential gas choice is offered in the service territories of two Maryland natural gas utilities:

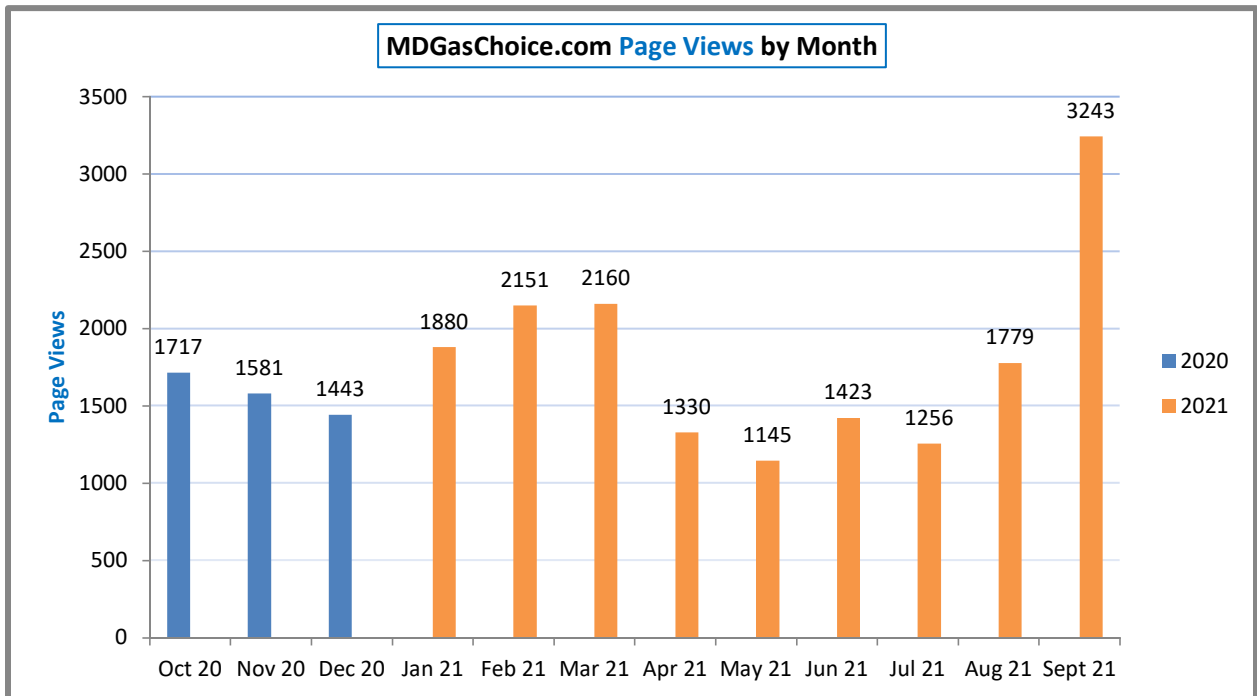
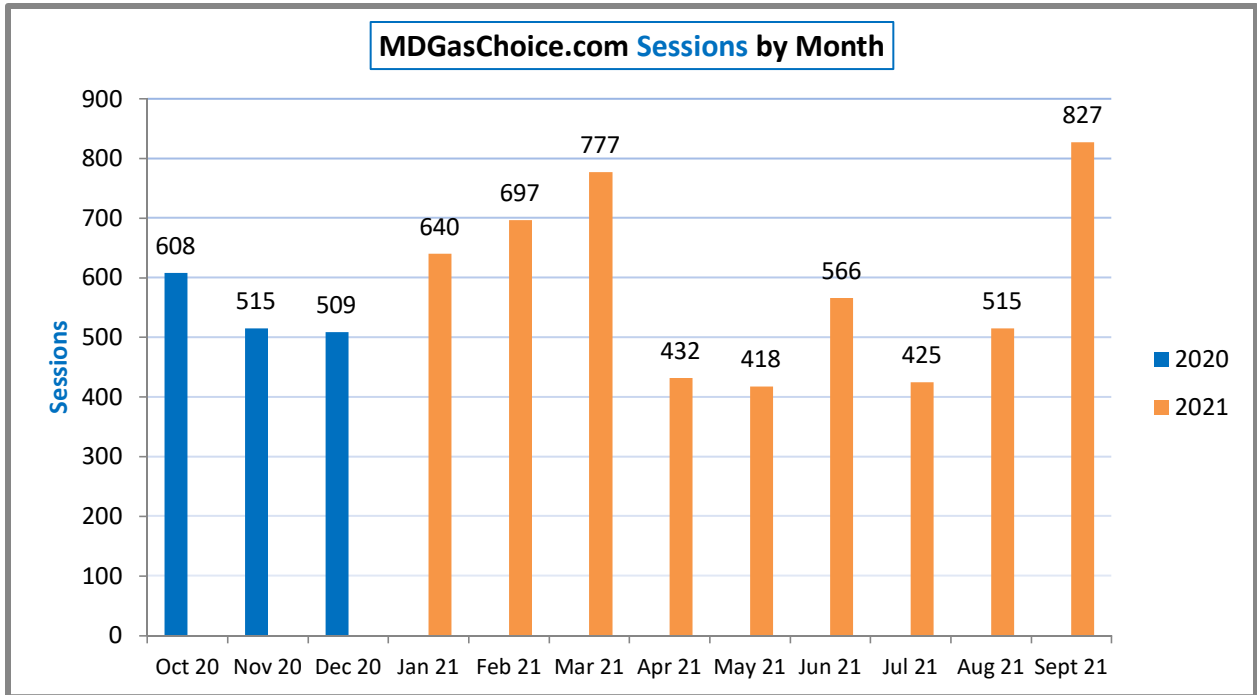
- Baltimore Gas and Electric Company
- Washington Gas Light Company

During the 2019 legislative session, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation (SB517/HB689) that required the PSC to establish enhanced customer choice shopping websites for residential electric and natural gas customers. The PSC’s electric choice website ([MDElectricChoice.com](http://MDElectricChoice.com)) launched in March 2020, and the gas choice website ([MDGasChoice.com](http://MDGasChoice.com)) launched in September 2020. Given that both sites have only been active for a short period of time, this report does not provide sufficient data points to provide a more in-depth, comprehensive analysis of the usage. We would also note that both sites launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have had some effect on usage. However, the Commission will continue to track usage data, which should provide a clearer picture over time and also serve as a metric for our promotional efforts.

The usage data provided for each website includes the number of **sessions by month** (defined as the total number of site visits during the measured timeframe) and **page views by month** (defined as the total number of pages viewed during the measured timeframe).



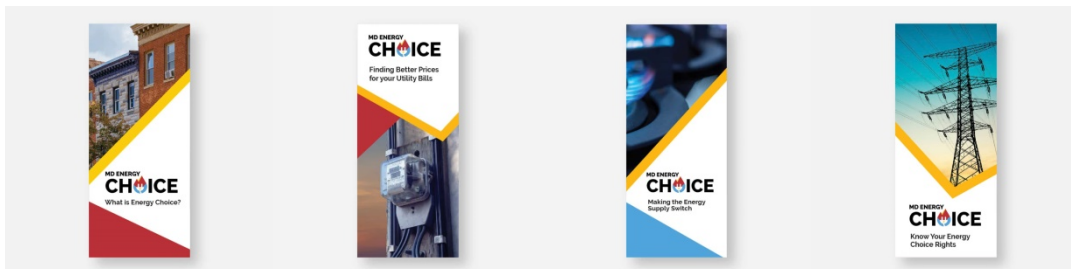
Overall visits to the MDElectricChoice.com site increased nearly 17 percent from its March 2020 launch compared to the most recent month of data available (September 2021).



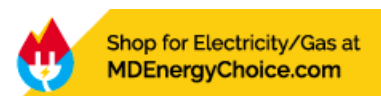
Overall visits to the MDGasChoice.com site rose nearly 36 percent from its October 2020 launch compared to the most recent month of data available (September 2021). In addition, seasonal fluctuations, particularly with gas supply shopping, are typical.

## PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES and IDEAS

- In August 2021, a new landing page ([MDEnergyChoice.com](https://www.MDEnergyChoice.com)) that links to both sites went live in what is known as a soft launch, or one that had not yet been announced publicly. This was to allow Commission staff to promote the live site at an exhibit booth during the 2021 Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) summer conference, while continuing to modify and enhance all three sites as necessary. The landing page serves to streamline the shopping process—customers have an official, ‘one-stop’ resource where they can shop for either electricity or natural gas supply, or both. Promotional efforts the Commission used at MACo included:
  - Soft-launching the new MDEnergyChoice logo (*seen on p. 1*),
  - Branded giveaway items such as canvas bags, mini LED lanterns and mini fans, and,
  - Four informational brochures.
- New social media accounts, [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), along with a year-long social content calendar, were subsequently developed under the MDEnergyChoice brand. The content calendar is a planning tool used to schedule and determine the content of social media posts in advance, for example, promoting the gas choice site ahead of the winter heating season.
- Four brochures were posted on the ‘Resources’ tab of the [gas](#) and [electric](#) choice sites, where they can also be downloaded and printed:



- The separate electricity and gas shopping buttons on the Commission’s main website were redesigned into a single button featuring the new colors and icon of the MDEnergyChoice brand:



- In the last few months, the Commission has participated in a number of community-based engagements including ‘Power in the Park’ events and constituent town halls sponsored by local elected officials.



*Brandi Nieland, OPC; Del. Lorig Charkoudian; PSC Chair Jason Stanek at Silver Spring ‘Power in the Park’ (August 2021)*

- The new landing page and social media accounts were officially announced in a [press release](#) and social media posts on October 4, 2021.

**Ideas under consideration in the short-term for additional promotional activities and enhanced customer education include:**

- A paid digital educational advertising campaign;
- Challenges persist in using digital methods to inform and educate elderly, low-income and other populations with limited or no internet access, or who do not use online resources; some of these may be the same residents frequently targeted by retail suppliers, whose tactics may include door-to-door sales, postcard mailers and telephone solicitations. Reaching these customers may require deploying more creative outreach efforts such as additional in-person community events, a Speakers’ Bureau, paid media including out-of-home and transit ads, radio and TV public service announcements, etc.

The Commission is also considering the use of a marketing consultant to assist in the development of additional recommended strategies to further enhance customer education about energy choice.

Due to the dynamic nature of supplier price offerings, the energy choice websites are updated by the suppliers—through a secure portal—on a continual basis as they make new offers available to residential customers within a utility’s service territory(s). The PSC will continue to monitor customer enrollments with retail electricity suppliers as well as the door-to-door sales activities reported by retail energy suppliers. Monthly customer complaint data received by the Consumer Affairs Division will continue to be posted each quarter on the PSC [website](#).

The PSC appreciates the opportunity to provide its initial information on usage of the Commission’s energy choice shopping websites since their respective launch dates, and to share ideas on ways to further promote the websites and to enhance consumer education related to electric and gas supplier shopping.