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Time for Energy Fixes



By John E. Stripp

For far too long energy has been like the weather: everyone talks about it, but no one does anything. Connecticut has the highest electric rates in the United States second only to Hawaii. This is totally unacceptable.

Deregulation of electric companies occurred in 1998 and I voted against the original plan. Unfortunately deregulation has been a dismal failure. Since 1998, there has been no systematic planning for the state's energy needs, and there have been no new generating facilities built. We need a comprehensive strategic plan which includes promoting energy efficiency, reducing demand and encouraging cleaner generation.

We should begin by learning from our border neighbors in New York State who have begun a "smart meter" initiative which enables consumers to access a broader range of time-differentiated rates and control their energy use timing. The "smart meter" is an advanced technology meter which identifies consumption in more detail than a conventional meter and communicates usage data to the local utility company for monitoring and billing purposes. When you match your energy use timing with the systems generating capacity you save money. The two-way communication provided by the "smart meter" has additional benefits of alerting the electric company to service interruptions and providing information which will improve generation, transmission and distribution design efficiency. The New York Times reports, "A paltry 135 of Connecticut Light & Power's 1.1 million residential customers have smart meters." We can and we must do better.

Connecticut should also be looking at the broader energy picture. We need to encourage and stimulate renewable energy technologies like fuel cells, geothermal, biomass, wind, solar and hydro. These are clean and efficient alternative sources of fuel that could supplement electrical generation capacity and would help reduce dependence on costly, finite, and environmentally problematic fossil fuels-like oil and coal.

The electric utility industry seeks assurances from the General Assembly that the rules will not keep changing year to year. Multimillion dollar investments in new generating plants, new technologies. And new transmission distribution infrastructure requires long-

term economic stability. Therefore, a “tinker and tweak” legislative mentality must cease and desist.

To be fair, any legislation the General Assembly approves this session will not provide immediate relief to monthly fuel and electric bills nor an immediate reduction in the base price of gas at the pump.

The energy problem is complex, and the solutions are not simple. Legislators on both sides of the aisle need to cooperate and craft long-range, viable strategies.

The passage of the 2007 Energy Plan with my support is progress toward a forward thinking state policy.

A number of energy initiatives are included in the bill. Measures to encourage conservation are to promote and encourage conservation and off-peak use of power, similar to one’s cell phone plan; offer an air conditioner/ furnace replacement program; expand “Green Buildings” standards for state projects; restore the previously-raided Energy Conservation and Load Management funds. Electric generation programs include convening a planning council to determine current and future generation needs, investigating building a new nuclear plant at Millstone and allowing additional generating facilities to meet peak power needs. As for energy taxes, the bill makes permanent tax exemptions for weatherization and energy saving products and continues sales tax exemptions for hybrid vehicles with 40 mpg ratings.

It takes political will, courage and accountability and the time is now to pass a comprehensive energy plan.