

Opinion

The shocking truth: One politician stopped electric rate reform

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By Paula Panzarella

IN 2009, thousands of United Illuminating customers in Connecticut demanded that the state's Department of Public Utility Control not grant an increase in our electric rates. The budgets for residents and small businesses were sorely stretched, especially in a recession marked by innumerable job losses, rising bankruptcies and housing foreclosures. Our collective voice was heard, and United Illuminating was ordered by the DPUC not to request another rate increase in 2009.

2010 is upon us. The real problem of a broken energy-purchasing system and not having a comprehensive energy plan, which affects Connecticut Light and Power customers as well, has to be corrected.

Energy reform still needs to happen. In the 2009 legislative session, the two chairmen of the Energy and Technology Committee, Rep. Vickie O. Nardello, D-89, and Sen. John W. Fonfara, D-1, had the task before them. Only one of them listened to constituents. The other stymied the process, resulting in no energy legislation being passed.

There were proposed bills that would have lowered electricity rates, improved transparency and accountability, bolstered the electricity supply and promoted renewable energy throughout the state. The people of Connecticut lost this opportunity to rein in electricity rates (the highest in the continental United States) and to have greater access to clean, sustainable energy.

There were extensive discussions and presentations in the Energy and Technology Committee as to how renewable energy could be developed and encouraged by the state. Many Connecticut municipalities, environmental groups and businesses took part in the hearings, including AARP, which sponsored Robert McCullough, an energy expert from Portland, Ore., to give a presentation to the Energy and Technology Committee about the concrete way a state energy authority could be developed, and how it would lower electric rates.

Here is the scenario of the last session: The Energy and Technology Committee passed the bills. The bills went before the House of Representatives and there was thoughtful discussion and consideration. The bills were all passed by a significant majority.

For the bills to become law, the state Senate also needed to approve the bills. Fonfara was responsible for bringing the bills onto the floor of the Senate, and he refused to. Our state senators were denied their chance to hear about proposed energy legislation and were never even given the opportunity to discuss and debate the bills' merits. By not presenting the legislation to the senators, the decision of the members of the energy and technology committee was ignored by Fonfara.

What Connecticut residents and businesses lost: One of the bills would have established the Connecticut Energy Authority. This bill, promoted by Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, would have changed procurement procedures for electricity and would have helped lower electricity costs. It would have had the authority to plan and purchase electricity directly from generators, bolster electricity supply and promote renewable sources. Another bill would have created more solar power incentives and help its development in Connecticut. By encouraging more solar power, a number of green jobs would have been created in the state. It was passed unanimously by the House.

Last year's legislative session produced very good energy bills, though they did not become law. Three men are responsible for the bills not being presented to the Senate: Fonfara, Sen. Martin M. Looney, D-11, and Sen. Donald E. Williams Jr., D-29. Looney is the majority leader of the Senate. Williams is the Senate president pro tempore. In their positions of leadership they could have asked Fonfara to bring these bills before the Senate for the necessary discussion and debate.

In October, the Connecticut Business & Industry Association held its 10th annual energy conference in Cromwell. The New Haven Register quoted Fonfara at the conference saying he wants "businesses in Connecticut to expand hydropower and low-level wind projects, as well as expand the fuel cell industry that has already been established here."

There was a chance last year that such an expansion into producing sustainable energy in Connecticut could occur with state support. It's too bad that Fonfara prevented that from happening. If he truly wants to have energy reform, he should cooperate with his energy and technology co-chairwoman, Vickie Nardello.

Fonfara needs to work on passing legislation for the Connecticut Energy Authority as it was drafted last year. Otherwise, based on his actions in the previous session, it looks like Fonfara's current interest in hydropower, wind and fuel cell development is just talk, aimed at side-stepping a more comprehensive energy reform package for the state.

Paula Panzarella of New Haven is a founding member of Fight the Hike, a consumer/business coalition working for lower cost electricity in Connecticut. Readers may write her at P.O. Box 3371, New Haven 06515. Her e-mail address is paulapanzarella@yahoo.com.

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