

A message from Bruce Weston

Ohio Consumers' Counsel



In 2015, the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel continued its work for Ohioans regarding their utility services, toward fulfilling the agency's mission of representation and education. Electricity issues were significant for 4.5 million Ohio households, with industry proposals for rate increases and with new technologies.

The agency's vision is for "informed consumers able to choose among a variety of affordable, quality utility services with options to control and customize their utility usage." The focus of the Consumers' Counsel Governing Board on electric consumer issues, in 2015, brought additional clarity to the fulfillment of the mission and vision.

We continued to favor markets for bringing lower energy prices to Ohioans for electricity and natural gas. The agency worked to fulfill the state's 1999 electricity policy. That law deregulated power plants. And the law favored markets over government regulation for pricing electricity.

Unfortunately for consumers, electric utilities made re-regulatory proposals that retreat from Ohio's commitment to markets and the benefits of markets for consumers. These anti-competitive proposals threaten the affordability of electric service for Ohioans. Our efforts to protect Ohioans from these proposals to subsidize deregulated power plants are described in this annual report.

As noted by Board Chairman Krebs, federal data show that Ohioans pay more for electricity, on average, than consumers in 32 other states. And AEP's own data show that, for 2014, its residential consumers in Ohio paid the highest electric bills among all the states where AEP provides service.

A bright spot for consumers (and markets) continues to be the natural gas prices offered by Ohio's natural gas utilities. Most of the major natural gas utilities use competitive auctions to price their standard offers to consumers. These auctions continue to produce low prices for Ohioans. The Consumers' Counsel for years has recommended competitive auctions for pricing natural gas service.

In 2015, we advocated to protect affordable and reliable basic telephone service for Ohioans who prefer that service or lack reasonable alternatives. We worked with the Ohio General Assembly on legislation, enacted in House Bill 64, for protecting consumers during the future transition of the telephone network to an internet-based system. Of note are the efforts of the Governor and the Ohio General Assembly to include more consumer protections in the telephone law.

I am grateful for the guidance and support of the Governing Board and for the leadership of Board Chair Gene Krebs and Vice-Chair Michael Watkins. Best wishes to departing Board member and former Vice-Chair Susheela Suguness. And welcome to new member Kelly Moore. I commend the agency's staff for their dedication and principled approach to our public service.

I thank the Administration and members of the Ohio General Assembly for considering utility issues that are important to Ohioans. I thank Attorney General Mike DeWine and his staff for their continued helpfulness to the agency and to the Governing Board in our services to Ohio consumers. I look forward to 2016, the year of the agency's 40th anniversary of public service, when there will be continued opportunities to make a positive difference for Ohioans.