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Editorial: PUCO must allow deposition to go ahead

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The putrid nature of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio as it exists may reach a new level of rot.

The organization's staff recommended blocking the sworn deposition of an outside auditor requested by the Ohio's Office of Consumers' Counsel. OCC wants the testimony on FirstEnergy in order to continue to pursue its investigation of the ratepayer ripoff called House Bill 6.

The OCC wants PUCO to allow the testimony despite the staff's objection. A preliminary conference on the request is scheduled Friday.

The consumer office wants to depose Oxford Advisors, a firm that's worked with PUCO over the years.

Why? Because Oxford worked on a report, left unfinished, into the surcharges later killed by the Ohio Supreme Court.

PUCO officials at the time didn't seem happy about where the report was going.

PUCO must allow this deposition to go forward. If PUCO refuses, any remnant of remaining trust between that organization and Ohio taxpayers is over — not that much is left. If PUCO continues to protect FirstEnergy, a vote of no confidence should be issued by the governor, legislators, and citizens.

It's long past time for reform of the commission, and should the commission vote against allowing the testimony, a complete overhaul must be the solution.

A state commission that supposedly regulates utilities shouldn't be in the business of protecting a utility embroiled in a \$61 million bribery scam. PUCO should be investigating, not blocking investigations into FirstEnergy, a point well-made by the OCC in court filings. Officials at PUCO don't seem to get it, the same things keep happening over and over. New leadership in the person of Jenifer French, appointed chair of the commission in 2021 by Gov. Mike DeWine changed nothing. It's the same old, same old lovefest with utilities. It must stop.

It's been said before, but fixing PUCO requires big changes, and the only way those changes can likely occur would be the election of PUCO commissioners. If the board is public, the public should determine those on the board.

Changing the PUCO into a consumer watchdog means undoing years of a culture where utilities simply rode roughshod over consumers and regulators.

Every member of the PUCO should consider themselves a consumer representative who takes seriously the responsibility of looking out for Ohio's utility ratepayers. That's the point of having a state regulatory board with the authority over utility companies.

It's time for Ohio to ensure the commission is working for Ohio ratepayers, not the companies collecting the rates.

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