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Editorial: Reform Ohio's PUCO

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Even before the corruption debacle that is Ohio House Bill 6, most consumers could smell a rat when it came to the way the state's Public Utilities Commission practiced oversight of FirstEnergy.

For years the state's utility regulatory agency has repeatedly rubber stamped questionable rate hikes and failed to hold the Akron-based energy company accountable for soaking its customers.

And then came HB 6, the 2019 \$61 million bailout of Akron-based FirstEnergy's two nuclear power plants, which was revealed to be the result of a complicated bribery scheme that has led to federal charges against the former state House Speaker, former Ohio Republican Party chairman and lobbyist Matt Borges, and others.

Then-PUCO Chairman Sam Randazzo, a former FirstEnergy consultant, took a \$4 million payout from the energy company. He abruptly resigned from the PUCO last November, not long after the FBI searched his home.

And even beyond the HB 6 scandal, the evidence just keeps piling up that the PUCO has not been looking out for Ohio energy consumers, particularly where FirstEnergy is concerned. In the last three years the state Supreme Court has ruled three times that PUCO decisions involving FirstEnergy were incorrect.

Now the office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel, which was a plaintiff in two of those cases, is arguing for systemic change at the state's utility oversight board so that consumers have a seat at the table -- literally. The OCC is arguing that at least one PUCO commissioner should be a ratepayer representative.

Ohio's needs to shift gears on public utility regulation or the skipping record will just keep playing the same old bars of music. Appointing individuals with ties to utility companies pretty much guarantees outcomes favorable to utilities. While familiarity with the industry is a good qualification, that doesn't mean that individuals with industry ties suit the board best. If the board is called 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. State authorities should consider electing members of the oversight board, much as Ohio voters now elect the state board of education. Designating at least one commissioner seat -- if not several -- explicitly for a ratepayer representative is another good idea.

Ideally EVERY member of the PUCO would 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 to oversee the utility companies that operate with little competition in Ohio.

It's time for Ohio to reform the way the PUCO commissioners are chosen to ensure the commission is working for Ohio ratepayers, not the companies collecting the rates.

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