



Legislators must let the public in on energy debate

EDITORIAL

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The Michigan Legislature has had before it for some time a wide range of bills to rewrite electric policy in Michigan. Some of the legislation is strongly supported by environmental groups. The bills call for heavy investment in what is considered "green" sources of energy -- wind, water, etc. The goal is to make the state more energy efficient and eventually to free it from its dependence on oil, natural gas and coal -- the carbon-based sources of fuel.

Other proposed bills, generally backed by Michigan's two largest utility companies -- DTE Energy and Consumers Power -- call for construction of nuclear and coal-fueled energy plants. These bills are vehemently opposed by environmentalists, who don't like the dependence on the carbon fuels.

They also are opposed by smaller, independent energy companies who feel giving in to the large utility firms will reduce their ability to compete.

These smaller companies also object to proposals that would allow DTE and Consumers to levy charges against existing customers to pay for construction of the new plants.

An official from one smaller energy company compared the situation to the auto companies levying surcharges on its current customers to pay for the development of future models.

Now, there's talk that the stalemate may be broken by a small group of lawmakers meeting in secret to produce a compromise package. These bills would be rushed through the Legislature and to Gov. Jennifer Granholm in a matter of days.

We hope that's not the case.

What's the rush? Why can't these proposals be released to the public for review?

If Michigan could go these many months without what advocates call vital reform, why can't the public look over any final deals?

Also, it seems the bottom line result of these back-room deals on energy will be higher profits for DTE and Consumers through larger costs to customers.

One of our biggest fears is that legislators, strapped for time and lacking in knowledge about certain energy bills, will bow to the persuasive arguments of lobbyists without fully understanding the bills -- what they will do and how they will affect residents' pocketbooks.

Certainly, DTE and Consumers have spent thousands of dollars -- through their representatives, commonly known as lobbyists -- to convince legislators that their package of energy bills is the best for Michigan. They claim, among other things, that the bills will produce jobs and guarantee the state's future energy needs.

That sounds good on paper, but is it worth it at the expense of competition in the industry? Between limiting its competitors and getting advanced financing from its customers, the two major energy companies also are guaranteeing huge company profits and large rate increases.

With Michigan losing population and having many auto plants and related facilities close, there has to be a decrease in demand for electrical power and natural gas.

We hope this will turn around as Michigan's economy comes back. But again, what's the hurry?

Certainly, you need to plan ahead, but there should be more than enough time to let the public review and have input on proposed legislation that will directly affect them both in their lifestyle and in their wallets.
