

Energy rate relief plans caught in Senate crossfire

By DANA TIMS
Of the Emerald

SALEM — Long before the 1979 Legislature convened, it was considered politically unwise to make a proposal that would amount to taxpayer subsidization of almost anything.

A few legislators, however, say they are still interested in providing relief to groups that need it most.

Last week, while Gov. Vic Atiyeh and his aides demanded cuts in the state's budget, two state senators argued for energy rate relief.

One of the plans, sponsored by Sen. L.B. Day, R-Salem, would direct the public utility commissioner to slash energy rates for seniors by 75 percent.

The other, introduced by Sen. Jack Ripper, D-North Bend, would use income, not age, as a criterion to authorize state energy coupons.

But at this point, the proposals are pitted against each other and one, or both, will be lucky to survive.

"Traditionally," says Day, "we have provided relief through the HARRP (Home Owners and Renters Rebate Program) program. But there's a real dilemma with the aged, especially with their utility bills."

Day's proposal, not yet in bill form, would also include disabled social security recipients.

"Going through the PUC (Public Utilities Commission," he maintains, "is easier than being ground through the tax mill. It's direct and it's effective." But the senator who chairs the committee that would hear the proposal isn't nearly as sure.

"Right now, that idea is jumping out of L.B. Day's head," says Sen. Jan Wyers, D-Portland, chair of the Senate Aging and Minority Affairs committee. "We're still in the information-gathering stage."

Last session, Wyers got involved in the drafting of an extensive home weatherization program. It taught him that ideas come much easier than end products.

"I spent literally hundreds of hours on that," adds Wyers. "And

found that real change is slow and sometimes impossible."

Utility companies would like to attach the same label of impossibility to Day's plan, preferring Ripper's energy coupon approach.

"Those just above the cut-off line would be hurt the most by that proposal," says Tom Berry, representative for Northwest Natural Gas. "Any rate cut for one group means higher rates for all other groups. Given a choice, we'd prefer the coupons. All people would share equally in paying for those."

Berry also notes that the PUC controls only natural gas and electricity. Other types of fuels, such as wood, gas, oil and coal would not be included in Day's plan.

"Fifty percent of seniors don't even use electricity," says Ripper. "They avoid it. I've seen eight elderly persons all huddled in one cold room because the rates were too high. Any plan we turn out should take into account all forms of energy."

Ripper estimates that a sufficiently funded energy coupon program would cost the state from \$20 million to \$40 million.

"My program is more social," he contends. "With the other, you would give a break to seniors, period — whether they were struggling on a fixed income or filthy rich."

The choice between cuts and coupons usually presents itself in time of war. The opening of any legislative session is just such a time and those choices are bouncing around again.

But with a war on inflation raging, and the governor engaged in a firefight with government spending, "social welfare" programs such as these may be the first drafted and the first gunned down.

Experts or public: who will prevail in energy policy?

Analysis by GREG WASSON
Of the Emerald

America is scrambling — scrambling to maintain a comfortable lifestyle despite dwindling resources. Energy, and discussion of whether our current uses are required or needlessly wastefully, has become the issue of the 70s.

In the private sector, that race has spurred development of new technologies to both generate additional power and decrease this country's consumption.

In government, the struggle has been aided by creation of programs designed to support development of new systems and catalogue information those systems create. The main agency in this state is the Department of Energy (DOE).

But Oregon has a new governor and what changes that will cause in energy planning aren't clear. Gov. Victor Atiyeh has promised to streamline and cut back government and rumor has it the DOE won't even exist come the new fiscal year (July 1).

However, July is five months away and any state agency needs a head. A drastic reorganization is easier when directed by a familiar face and Gov. Atiyeh has put Kelly Woods, who's been involved in Oregon's energy planning for some time, in charge of the DOE.

Woods was a staff member on the old nuclear and thermal siting council, served a stint as executive director of the present siting board and most recently taught a class at Oregon State.

Probably the most important aspect of Woods' energy philosophy is his acceptance of power from the atom.

"I'm satisfied that down through the decades the nation is going to need nuclear power. How much and when in the Pacific Northwest is a different question, but at the present time, it's probably the best way to go."

Woods denies charges by environmentalists like John

Platt, executive director of the Oregon Environmental Council, that he is "a nuclear advocate."

"I guess I'm a power advocate," explains Woods. "When I think about opportunities for kids in Oregon to find jobs here, I want to insure there's sufficient power for industrial growth."

Platt remains suspicious. "Woods' pro-nuclear statements indicate the kind of bias he's bringing into the department. He's also demonstrated an interest in having professionals make decisions about siting and development of new plants."

The controversy over whether highly technical decisions, such as the need for and safety of new energy facilities, should be left to the experts or made by lay people considering technology as merely one aspect, is central to the energy question.

"Even within the realm of technical decisions," says Michael Farley, executive director of Oregon Common Cause, "there are a lot of value judgements that need to be made. To assert that those with expertise should always dominate that kind of policy-making is dangerous."

Currently, siting certificates — in effect the building permits for new plants — must be approved by a seven-member board appointed by the governor.

Woods is quick to point out that his plans aren't formalized, but says he may recommend to Atiyeh that siting decisions be made by a board, like the old nuclear council, composed of both public members and state agency heads.

"To have concerned state agencies represented on the commission would bring actions that are somewhat more wise because of having those knowledgeable people on the board."

Platt isn't convinced. "We've heard that over and over and over from the utilities, that the public is not competent to make those decisions."



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