

FORUM

EDITORIAL

In gas-pipeline law, ratepayers again take a back seat to utilities

It's not clear if such rankings are kept, but any list of the most pro-utility states — and pro-utility governors — would surely give Ohio, and Republican Gov. Mike DeWine, a place near the top of the scoreboard.

Latest example: The governor's decision to sign into law Amended Substitute House Bill 201, which, according to the pithy comment of a legislator who opposed the measure, state Sen. Kent Smith, a Euclid Democrat, "allows gas utility companies to build pipelines anywhere under the guise of economic development."

"That means," he added in a Dec. 31 cleveland.com guest column, "the utility could build a bunch of pipelines to dozens of potential industrial sites, hoping that a company moves into just one of those sites and the utility gets a new customer."

But here's the rub: Even if those pipelines are in fact never used by new customers won't matter on gas consumers' monthly bills: HB 201 requires ratepayers to cover the cost of any gas lines built, plus any planning or development work that may have preceded pipeline construction and its regulatory approval — all, essentially, on speculation.

The new law offers no clear explanation for why consumers, rather than utility investors, should pay for gas lines that might never benefit consumers or the state's economic development goals.

Meanwhile, the "Intel" argument — that the state needs pipeline-equipped sites — falls flat when one considers that Intel Corp. wasn't influenced by that, and in fact aims to use all-renewable power at its Ohio mega-factory site.

However, there's no question about one point: The hurriedly added pipeline provisions in HB 201 — a bill that started out life as (and still contains) a prohibition on Ohio adopting California's strict auto emissions standards or trying to ban cars based on their fuel source — will plump up gas companies' profits.

As cleveland.com's Jeremy Pelzer and Jake Zuckerman reported, the bill DeWine signed Dec. 28 would let Ohio gas utilities "charge Ohio's 3.7 million gas customers up to \$1.50 per month for as long as five years to extend gas lines to sites that could potentially be used for megaprojects, even if no buyer has been lined up yet." That could work out to as much as \$5.55 million per month.

The \$1.50 monthly charge was already in law but applied only to narrowly defined and authorized actual investments — which have dwindled in number (and costs on customers' bills).

"Columbia Gas currently charges its customers 63 cents per month on their monthly bills. Both Dominion and CenterPoint charge their customers 3 cents per month," Pelzer and Zuckerman reported.

In other words, natural gas utilities were in search of a bonanza, and got one, thanks to Ohio's obsequiously pro-utility elected officials — and the pipeline amendments rushed into being over a roughly 36-hour period. Among those who opposed the gas utility giveaway was the Ohio Manufacturers' Association, whose members are among the state's biggest consumers of natural gas.

True, there is a gossamer-thin stipulation that, to qualify, prospective sites would have to be supported by JobsOhio, the state's economic development quango, its affiliates, or the state Development Department.

Still, those agencies are hardly immune to executive — or legislative branch — nudging, i.e., lobbying. And the procedural template that HB 201 creates amounts to a bypass of rate-case procedures by the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio that, for all their weaknesses, offer some rate-setting safeguards for Ohio consumers.

The General Assembly's excessive deference to utilities has already stoked the FirstEnergy Corp./House Bill 6 scandal and its still-ongoing federal corruption investigation. Among consequences: the convictions and imprisonment of former Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder and former Republican State Chair Matthew Borges, and the indictment of former PUCO Chair Samuel Randazzo, who awaits trial and is entitled to the presumption of innocence.

DeWine signed HB 6 the same day the General Assembly passed it in July 2019. And while the General Assembly has since repealed parts of HB 6, it still requires Ohio ratepayers to shell out more than \$153,000 a day to subsidize two money-losing coal-fired power plants, one in Indiana. HB 6 also squeezed Ohio's renewable energy and energy efficiency standards in provisions that also remain in effect.

The passage of House Bill 201 is evidence, were more needed, that what the utilities want from the General Assembly, and the governor, they usually get. That is, what should be a ratepayer-utility balance at the Statehouse is anything but. As a matter of fairness, that needs to change.

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COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

Unwritten novels, unscheduled trips: Retirement's not following the plan.

Cliff Anthony

After working for more than 45 years, I called it quits this summer. When I tell my friends I'm retired, they respond that I look too young to retire. Thank you very much!

Such compliments bring levity and smiles and prompt me to rush to the mirror. The gray hair and neck wrinkles tell me that people are simply being polite, but lacking empathy. It's like thanking the dentist who drilled the heck out of a root canal and sent you home with a whopping bill.

Way before I cleaned out my desk, I had meticulously filled my weekly planner with many exciting activities. But the first Monday after the "R" day, as my neighbors whizzed past my driveway for work, the reality set in. "Gosh, what have I done?"

A wave of uncertainty swept in, as if treading through a tunnel with no light and no air. Call it buyer's remorse. I had a strong impulse to ask my former boss whether it was too late for me to change my mind, but keep the generous going-away gifts.

Gradually, I eased into a retired life different from the one I had envisioned.

Frequent visits to the nearby fieldhouse brought a much-needed distraction. However, walking in circles on the track was not on my agenda.

Like many retirees, I hoped to spend every hour crafting the next greatest legal thriller novel — a la John Grisham. The summer has gone, and winter has set in. All that is left of this dream project is a blank page.

I also became a regular at local libraries, and I had to remind the librarians that I was not a homeless person.

The libraries feature print editions of major publications. It confirms my argument that print journalism

is not dead. The only glitch is that you won't find all the pages of newspapers in the library versions. Chances are the pages may be scattered on different tables. If you find a newspaper intact, please go to the nearest gas station and buy a lottery ticket.

With the recent first snow blast of the season, I found a new hobby. In the morning, I look out the window wondering when my snow plower, who collected the season's fee in advance, will show up. It's like Waiting for Godot.

I don't need GPS to locate grocery stores and to find beer, potato chips and hot dogs in different aisles. Hello, guys: Did you know mozzarella cheese comes in different forms — grated, sliced, sticks, slabs, and balls? And it is easy to get yellow onions confused with sweet onions. Appearances can be deceiving.

I'm in no hurry at the barbershop. I would give up my turn so that I could eavesdrop on barbers gossiping among themselves and with the person in the swivel chair. They are the super-local reporters of others' private lives.

If you're like me, you'll be busy drawing and redrawing your travel plans to Europe, Aruba and the Himalayas. This process is fascinating and cheaper than the actual, expensive visits.

Another benefit of retirement is that if you're wide awake during the wee hours of the morning, you can catch up on your lost sleep in the afternoon.

A word of wisdom for those who plan to retire: Don't worry, after passing through the tunnel, you'll ride on a stress-free easy street.

You earned the retirement. Enjoy it!

Anthony, a Highland Heights resident, is the author of the upmarket fiction "Tears in God's Own Country."

COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

Cut down on meat, to benefit everyone

Jannah Kazmi

I am a member of Laurel School's Environmental Justice Semester, a program where high schoolers like me work to protect our air, water and land. I've learned that a lot of these issues feel so big, but the solutions can actually be quite simple. We need systemic change, but as we work on that, we can all help now: We can eat less meat.

A 2019 Sentient Media article taking into account "94 different studies, papers, articles and other academic resources" found that "animal agriculture, including meat production, is responsible for at least 37 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions." These greenhouse gases are driving climate change.

By continuing to consume meat at a high rate, we are putting the planet, and ourselves, at risk. Climate change is causing bad air quality, flooding, and global disasters.

Meat production inefficiently uses lots of natural resources, including water, trees, and animals. This can lead to water scarcity, deforestation, and a loss of biodiversity. The nonprofit Humane League states that, "Consumer demand for burgers and steaks accelerates deforestation at an unsustainable rate. The more beef people consume, the more trees the beef industry consumes to clear land for cattle and feed," making meat consumption a top cause of deforestation. As more trees are cleared to make room for producing meat, lots of carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere. This happens because fewer trees are there to absorb the carbon dioxide, and this then speeds up global warming and leads to an unhealthy environment for humans.

Meat production, especially beef, is an inefficient use of our freshwater resources. What might come to mind when thinking about water conservation is turning off the water while you brush your teeth, quickly showering, and/or doing other things that limit your use of water. Yet, one of the best things you can do is to reduce your meat consumption because, as CNN reports, "it takes

1,800 gallons of water to produce one pound of beef." Imagine how much water could be saved if people decided to occasionally give up beef — even just once a week.

Meat production even adds to biodiversity loss. As trees are cut down to make space for meat animals, many species lose their homes. This affects people too because it triggers ecosystem collapse and puts our food supply in danger.

Meat consumption can lead to negative health outcomes, and Americans are one of the top consumers of it in the world. By regularly eating meat, you are at risk for high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, cancer, strokes, and coronary heart disease. Scripps Health, citing a Harvard School of Public Health study, states that, "One daily serving of processed red meat — one hot dog or two slices of bacon — was associated with a 20% increased risk of death from cardiovascular disease or cancer." So, reducing, if not eliminating, meat from your diet is essential, and proves to have health benefits.

Yes, there is a way you can make an impact to help save the planet, animals, and your health: Reduce how much meat you eat. I realize that it's a big change to stop eating meat, but even just reducing your consumption can be good for many reasons. Movements like Meatless Mondays advocate for reducing meat consumption for the greater good. Switching to plant-based options is one way to make the step to eliminate meat seem easier. Consuming Vitamin B-12 is also an option. Since it is usually found in meat, with a correct intake, it can make up for the loss of that vitamin source due to the elimination of meat.

Overall, eating too much meat is bad for the planet, and almost everything in it. Reducing it, or ideally eliminating it, is the best way to ensure a healthy future for us all.

Kazmi is a student in Laurel School's Environmental Justice semester.

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