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Shine some light on electricity package

For months, the Legislature has had before it a wide-ranging set of bills to rewrite electric policy in Michigan. The expectation in Lansing is that a small group of lawmakers meeting in secret will soon produce a compromise package, which will be rushed through the Legislature and to Gov. Jennifer Granholm in a matter of days.

Why? What's the hurry over at the Capitol? If Michigan could go these many months without what advocates call vital reform, why can't the public chew over the final deal?

In fact, Lansing-area lawmakers could take a pledge: I refuse to support a vote on these bills until I have time to show them - in their entirety - to interested constituents.

The likely result of this backroom dealing on energy will be higher costs for customers and stronger bottom lines for the state's two big utilities: Jackson-based Consumers Energy and Detroit Edison.

Those two firms have certainly enhanced the local economy in lobbying the Legislature and the Granholm administration to restrict competition for electric consumers, and require customers to guarantee their financial dealings. (It's called paying for new power plants now that might not be built for years.)

For this, Granholm and her allies see the glow of renewable energy. Consumers and DTE promise to invest in renewable power in the future, if they get their way in Lansing today.

This is not an unusual dynamic in the capital. Industries or particular companies push their agendas or strike deals with pols all the time. And almost always it is done well out of sight.

Why?

If this energy package will be a great leap forward for utility customers, for new industries to feed renewable power, for the state's natural assets, why not put the whole thing before the voters?

And, no, not via a statewide vote. Legislators are paid to do the state's business. But, really, there's no practical reason barring the publication, on a dedicated Web site, of the entire texts of the bills the Legislature will get from its secret committee.

Those texts could be available for a week or so, giving lawmakers time to consult with constituents about their views. Then, each chamber could hold a full public debate and then - and only then - take a vote.

If, however, lawmakers are not willing to act in public, they should simply dump this entire package and begin work on a new bill that addresses the one thing everyone wants: More renewable energy.