

Jack Lessenberry's Essays and Interviews

Essay: Alternative Energy - 8/18/2008

From time to time I get attacked for being too liberal.

So let me say that when it comes to the energy legislation now pending in the Michigan legislature, I stand one hundred percent with a conservative economist from Hillsdale College named Gary Wolfram. As far as I can determine he, more than anyone else, sees what an anti-consumer farce both packages of bills are.

What both the house and senate bills would do is give Consumers Energy and DTE a virtual monopoly over the energy market. "The legislature is on the verge of having the government decide whom businesses and consumers can buy their energy from, and of letting bureaucrats determine what prices for energy should be," Wolfram wrote in an essay a few weeks ago in the Detroit News.

"It is competition that drives prices down, not government guaranteed monopolies," he added. "The unintended consequence will be higher energy costs and rising unemployment."

He's absolutely right. Except that I am not at all certain that higher energy costs are unintended. If this plan passes, the lobbyists for the utility companies should get some very fat bonuses. They did their job, all right.

Our elected leaders, sadly, let us down. This legislation is being billed as pro-renewable energy, if you listen to the propaganda. But they are actually designed to ward off any competition the two biggest utilities may face. They are, again, Consumers Energy, and DTE, which many people still think of as Detroit Edison.

These bills call on the utilities to use "renewable sources," which primarily means wind power, for no more than ten percent or less of their energy needs, and then not till the year 2015.

In fact, the Senate bill calls on them to do only about half that much. What if we get to 2014 and they don't seem to be ready?

Well, there isn't anything in these bills that would prevent our lawmakers from giving them an extension.

What these bills do require is that no more than ten percent of a utility's customer load go to alternative energy suppliers.

Think you can supply a lot more of that, faster and cheaper, to the people of Michigan? Your legislature is telling you, too bad.

This is seen as appalling, by the way, in left as well as right-wing circles. The Customer Choice Coalition is made up of both business and consumer groups, plus alternative energy suppliers.

“Competition is still the best way to increase the amount of renewable power in the state while holding down prices for all,” their spokesman said recently. He urged the legislature to open the doors to more competition. The lawmakers don’t seem interested.

Why? My guess is, because we aren’t paying attention. Besides, they are all term-limited. Every one of them will be gone in five years, most of them to run for other things.

Guess where they will be looking for campaign contributions.

If this bothers you, you just might want to let the governor and your legislators know how you feel.