

# Your View: Stalled utility reform bill deserves support

Gerry Tuoti's article "Debate over LNG pipelines heating up" (Dec. 13) did a good job summing up the issues — our electricity and heating needs, a study from our utilities saying we require more natural gas and a study from our attorney general saying we don't, more claims and counter-claims. Here's a couple more points.

Our for-profit utilities, National Grid and Eversource, insist that their motive for piping in more natural gas is to keep our utility prices low and service reliable. Should we trust a study they commissioned that supports their plan as the best approach? OK, but we should also verify. How do we verify? That is the job of our attorney general. She dutifully commissioned an independent study of the issue to verify their claim, but her study came to the opposite conclusion. Now we're getting more rationalizations, and we learned from Willie Soon that studies are sometimes produced to say whatever the study's commissioner wants. Where do we go from here?

At this point, National Grid and Eversource must overcome the presumption that our AG — elected by the people, and accountable to the people — stands for the public's best interests, whereas for-profit utilities represent, first and foremost, their own shareholders' profit-making interests.

Here's how these corporate utilities can overcome this presumption: A utility reform bill (H. 2866) has sat in the state Legislature for years. This bill, which was endorsed by 100 municipalities, calls for reforms in the process that allows municipalities to establish their own not-for-profit utilities.

History suggests that Massachusetts' existing municipal utilities can provide electricity to residents at about one-third the prices charged by for-profit utilities, and municipal utilities tend to have better track records for restoring power to residents after severe weather outages.

This is also the experience of other states (for example, Nebraska — where all electricity service is provided by municipal utilities — has some of the lowest electricity rates in America, and a booming wind energy sector because their not-for-profit utilities answer to the public's desire for renewables).

If our for-profit utilities are primarily concerned about the public getting cheap, reliable electricity, they should work with this bill's sponsors to ensure a good version of the bill is passed this spring because this may be

the best path to cheap, reliable electricity, with public input into energy-sourcing decisions.

In addition to our stalled utility reform bill, we also have a stalled bill that seeks to reduce constraints on solar development. According to recent reports, our for-profit utilities — along with organizations beholden to fossil fuel interests — lobbied our Legislature to water down this solar bill.

The experience of other states (for example, Minnesota) is that for-profit utilities argue against solar development and for natural gas. In one notable case, the utility's arguments failed judicial review because building more natural gas infrastructure increased utility profits while also increasing ratepayer risks and potential costs.

If National Grid and Eversource work with Natural Resources Defense Council (and other environmental groups, instead of fossil fuel-connected associations) to shepherd a good solar bill through the state Legislature this spring, then they would help to verify that they care about the public's desire to develop solar, rather than just the utility's own bottom line.

Also, as long as National Grid and Eversource talk about providing cheap electricity, without including a cost of carbon in their studies of pipelines and natural gas versus other options, then they aren't presenting true costs. A national carbon tax is the best way to ensure energy decisions reflect the public's true, total potential costs.

The Houston Chronicle editors reported last week that ExxonMobil met with them, explained the serious risks of climate change and its urgency. Both Exxon and the Chronicle are now on record forcefully endorsing national carbon pricing. National Grid, Eversource and other large utilities can convince us that they care about our energy costs (both direct costs and indirect costs due to carbon emissions and climate change risk) by lobbying congressional Republicans for a national carbon tax.

Until our large, for-profit utilities energize our Legislature and the U.S. Congress to pass a good municipal reform utility bill and a good solar bill for the commonwealth, and a national carbon fee, the presumption is Attorney General Maura Healey protects the public from bad energy decisions foisted on us by utilities and fossil fuel lobbyists.

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